

Southern Land, Hardened Heart:
the possibility of Australian neon noir

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Abstract

Much can be learnt from dwelling in the dark underbelly of society, and it is for such reasons *neon noir* crime fiction has become one of the most enduring ways of analysing our culture at large. Evolving from the hard-boiled private detective stories found in early pulp fiction magazines, neon noir offers violent narratives that vivisection the social, historical, and political landscape, often blurring the line between fact and fiction. Thus neon noir eschews the romanticism of the classic hard-boiled model, and embraces something far more subversive: populist novels driven by contemporary cultural analysis.

Despite both literary and commercial success in North America, Australian authors have often shied away from wholly embracing the neon noir style. This is somewhat perplexing, as Australia has had a long and enduring relationship with all forms of crime writing, especially hard-boiled—the progenitor of neon noir. So why do we shy away from the neon noir style in Australia? What are the difficulties, considerations, and possibilities of localising the form? Do the conventions of the sub-genre shift when placed in an Australian setting?

This practice-led thesis consists of an Australian neon noir novel entitled *Coffin's Reach*, and a 50,000 word exegesis that accompanies the creative work. The creative work takes place in 1985 rural Queensland, and is inspired by the real-world institutional corruption rampant during the period. Unfolding in the wake of a teenager's disappearance from the side of the road, *Coffin's Reach* focuses on three troubled residents of the Well—a bankrupt mill town—who are drawn into a shadowy conspiracy that involves the locals, the police, and even the government itself. The exegesis explores the process of creating this localised neon noir novel, and ruminates on the future possibilities of the form.

Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature:

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Project Outputs & Awards

research

Such is Life: Chaos Theory in Australian crime fiction

Chaos and the Detective (2016/Forthcoming)

Book Chapter

The Larrikin Curse: Neon Noir and the fear of extremity in Australian hard-boiled

ACA/PCA (New Orleans, USA 2015)

Conference Paper

Darkening Horizons: The Great White Divide in Peter Temple's 'The Broken Shore' and 'Truth'

Whiteness Interrogated (2015)

Book Chapter

Darkening Horizons

Whiteness4 (Oxford, England 2014)

Conference Paper

Blood in the Dust: the possibility of Australian hard-boiled

Ignite!13 (Brisbane, Australia 2013)

Conference Paper

fiction

Coffin's Reach

The Australian (2016)

Novel Extract

A Rope Stretched Between

Review of Australian Fiction (2014)

Short Story

awards

The Australian/Vogel's Literary Award (Shortlist)

2016

Australian Society of Authors Mentorship Program

2015

QUT Post-Graduate Literary Award (Shortlist)

2014

Australian Postgraduate Award

2013

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CHAPTER ONE

The Lay of the Land

'Neither beast nor bird inhabited these lonely and inhospitable regions, over which the silence of the grave seemed to reign.'

— Charles Sturt, *Personal Journal*

'The first colonial building was a jail, and when the free men hadn't been able to make a go for it, the whole colony was turned into an open prison, populated by screws and cons, johns and janes, and nothing in between.'

— David Whish-Wilson, *Line of Sight*

Part One **The Project**

Australian fiction has had a long and enduring relationship with crime writing. The reason for this is simple. As barrister and writer Charles Waterstreet once noted: ‘Australia started its white life at a distinct advantage of the telling of criminal stories...Everyone was a criminal’ (Waterstreet in Corris 2012, VII). While this comment is undoubtedly an overstatement used by Waterstreet for comedic effect, his words do reveal the clear intersections that exist between white Colonial settlement in Australia and locally produced crime fiction.

Despite this strong relationship with the telling of criminal stories, local writers have often shied away from embracing the distinct qualities of neon noir—a sub-genre of tough and often violent crime writing that has grown from the classic hard-boiled pulp fiction story, a writing form that was quite influential in Australia during the late 20th century. Often politically and historically focused, neon noir seems a perfect match for Australia’s tumultuous history of institutional crime and corruption.

This creative-based project offers an Australian neon noir novel, and a related thesis that explores a number of questions driving the research and fiction: What are the difficulties, considerations, and possibilities of localising the form? Why do local writers shy away from the neon noir style? Do the conventions of the sub-genre shift when placed in an Australian setting? Through my research and creative project the possibility of Australian neon noir will be explored. It must be clarified that the research of this project does not aim to outline a singular template that all Australian authors must employ to create a localised neon noir novel; but instead wishes to identify the broader conventions of the sub-genre, whether they can be successfully reimagined within an Australian setting, and the wider implications brought forward by localisation.

the method

As the research praxis of this project heavily revolves around my practice as a fiction writer, *Southern Land, Hardened Heart* is defined by two separate sections: an exegetical research component, and a fictional creative work. Although each can stand alone, they are ultimately holistic. My research into the requirements of an Australian neon noir novel inform the writing of the creative component, and the failures and successes of this process ultimately impact the project's conclusion. In this way, the research process functions almost as an 'iterative cyclic web' (Smith & Dean 2009, 2).

The core question driving this project is ultimately one of craft: What are the difficulties, considerations, and possibilities of localising the form? As I consider myself primarily a fiction writer, I have focused on elements often considered during the creative process to address such a question. In his book *Writing Fiction*, Garry Disher discusses how fiction, including crime fiction, is 'always constructed of certain formal features: character, point of view, narrative, symbolism, prose and theme' (Disher 2001, 23). Bolstered by a number of scholars working in the field of narratology, these six elements of craft have ultimately guided the direction of my research, and are discussed in the context of crime fiction extensively throughout the body of the exegetical.

One may consider these six craft elements as outlined by Disher to be somewhat rudimentary, but there are two strong reasons for their use. Firstly, as this project ruminates on the requirements of an Australian neon noir—a text that may not yet exist—it is important to examine the base elements of the sub-genre, so as to provide a broader foundation for future research. Secondly, Disher himself is an Australian crime writer who often flirts with neon noir influences, and his works are referenced throughout. Subsequently, his guide to writing fiction seems undeniably relevant to the subject matter at the heart of my research.

Although Disher's non-fiction work has been integral to developing the methodology of *Southern Land, Hardened Heart*, it must be noted that *Writing Fiction* does not deal with neon noir, nor does it provide advice on how to construct a localised iteration of the form. Instead it provides general guidance on the creative process of writing. To support Disher's research, I have also used a number of theoretical works concerned specifically with writing crime, albeit not neon noir; these include book chapters and articles by Deborah Adelaide (1996), Minette Walters (1996), and Stephen Knight (2006). This focus on craft, while important to the entire project, underpins Chapter Two of this document: an exegetical component exploring the research and writing process of *Coffin's Reach*.

the critical

In the remaining parts of this opening chapter, the origin, common elements, and definitions of both neon noir and Australian crime fiction will be established, alongside the key texts used throughout this project. Furthermore, the contribution to knowledge will be discussed at length to position my research within the wider cannon of crime writing and associated academia.

Chapter Two, Part One discusses the requirements of an Australian neon noir *character*. This investigation is integral to the success of the creative work, as character is often perceived as the central pillar for crime fiction; in fact, 'The emphasis on the 'human' character is crucial' for a narrative to be considered more than a sequence of events (Fludernik 2009, 6). Furthermore, from a craft perspective, character is often the primary driving force behind the production of a narrative. This is because, as Garry Disher says, the emergence of a character in the author's mind allows them to 'enter, tell and shape their novels and stories, express ideas, and drive and develop plots' (Disher 2001, 45).

Crime novels will typically feature two or more of the following character types, each capable of becoming a driving force: ‘the main character (there may be more than one); the ‘goals’ of the main character (for example, a potential lover); those who help the main character; those who hinder the main character; and those who influence the main character in passing’ (Disher 2001, 45). Despite discussing texts featuring all of the above, this sub-chapter will predominately focus on the protagonists of neon noir. The reason for such a refined focus is twofold: firstly, the scope of this project unfortunately does not allow a full analysis of every secondary character archetype; and secondly, despite some exceptions, the protagonist or protagonists in the sub-genre have the most agency within a narrative, and therefore drive the plot.

Working in tandem with character is *point of view*, which ‘determines the way readers gain their information, and governs the view they have on events... and themes’ (Disher 2001, 76). In Part Two, I examine the use of both first-person and third-person point of view in neon noir, and how these approaches ostensibly illuminate certain expectations of the form. Second-person will not be discussed in great detail, however, as it is rarely used within the sub-genre.

In regards to craft, the difference between these points of view is clear. In first-person ‘the narrator is actually a character in the story, either the main character or a relatively minor character observing the actions of others’ (Disher 2001, 85); while third-person gives the reader a sense the story is being ‘told *about* a character or set of characters rather than *by* a character’ (Disher 2001, 78). As the ‘problem of a satisfactory narrative point of view is...nearly insoluble’ (Kuiper 2011, 11), I will also deliberate on my own failures and successes in implementing different points of view, and how this experimentation had an impact upon the final draft of the creative work.

In Part Three, the narrative trends of neon noir are discussed, specifically ‘the overall shape of a...novel’ (Disher 2001, 113). Undoubtedly this shape is informed by an interplay of multiple elements: character, point of view, symbolism, prose, theme, etc. Within this sub-chapter, however, I focus primarily on how a narrative is constructed, and the reasons behind this construction. In the context of my research, a stark distinction exists between the terms narrative and story; and, as both will be used repeatedly throughout the project, the definition of each must be made clear. Obviously within different fields of research these terms may have divergent definitions, but within *Southern Land*, *Hardened Heart* narrative refers to the ‘act’ of storytelling and ‘its product’; while story is ‘that which the narrative discourse reports’ (Fludernik 2009, 2). In short, narrative refers to the cumulative effect of the novel’s individual stories, while story is the movement from one event to the next.

In each discussed narrative, elements of symbolism exist, and these are explored in detail during Part Four of Chapter Two. In his book *Writing Fiction*, Disher discusses how ‘an emblem of the setting, if repeated, can...act as a symbol’ (Disher 2001, 139). Thus, in many novels, symbolism often manifests directly in relation to the representation of the setting. This is undoubtedly true of neon noir, where the predominately urban backdrop is symbolically positioned ‘not as the site of the American dream, but as the epicentre of an all-consuming nightmare’ (Haut 1999, 179). Within this sub-chapter I explore the symbolic qualities of a neon noir setting, and how it ultimately embodies a number of distinct themes found within the sub-genre.

And finally, Part Five examines the distinct prose of the neon noir form. When referring to prose, I refer not to poetry or prose novels, but rather the words on the page and their construction. ‘Writers work with words’; they have ‘sounds, associations, suggestive power, rhythm, fixed and slippery meanings as well as concrete and abstract qualities’ (Disher 2001, 180). For such reasons, it is important to discuss the distinct prose approach of

the average neon noir writer, and how their work ultimately contributes to a genre whose ‘predominant artifice is its apparent lack of artifice’ (Haut 1999, 2).

Although Disher explicitly states that theme is a formal feature found in fiction, a sub-chapter will not be devoted to the subject; instead it will be discussed throughout the exegetical in direct relation to other craft elements. This is because theme is not ‘artificially bound together by critics seeking significance in coincidental matters of narrative art’ (Keen 2003, 32), but is instead expressed by the author ‘through the arrangement of events’ (Disher 2001, 44). Therefore theme is inextricably linked with the other five features of fiction.

These five sub-chapters, while discussing different aspects of craft, all employ a similar structure: the history of each is identified in hard-boiled, how they have changed within neon noir is discussed, and then the localised version—or lack thereof in some cases—is contextualised. Finally, my own work is considered and analysed. As outlined in greater detail later in this document, discussion within these sub-chapters is complimented by the work of a number of notable scholars within the field, and various novels by hard-boiled, neon noir, and Australian authors.

the creative

Chapter Three of this project is a creative work entitled *Coffin’s Reach*, which takes place in rural Queensland during the height of police and governmental corruption. Blurring fact and fiction much like many neon noir authors before me, the novel begins an alternate timeline for Queensland that eventually culminates in Tony Fitzgerald’s ‘Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Misconduct’¹ (1989)—a real world investigation into police corruption that ‘changed the policing and political landscape in Queensland and across Australia’ (CCC para. 4, 2014).

¹ Otherwise known as the Fitzgerald Report.

In the wake of a teenage girl's disappearance, three troubled residents of the Well—a bankrupt South Queensland mill town—are drawn into a shadowy world of institutional corruption. James Royce, a young cop struggling to escape the career mistakes of his past, is tasked with the girl's investigation. William Farrow, a former rural boxing champion, is about to go head-to-head with the local mill over a forced stop-work. And Nicole Farrow, William's young daughter, is treading a dark path that will take her from voyeurism to murder.

With the heat of summer slowly rising, the actions of each character interweave to reveal the rotten core at the heart of the Well. Royce, uncovering the tragic life of the missing girl and her dangerous connections to the mill, is hampered by forces intent on derailing his investigation. Farrow, refusing to strike, and curious about the mill's true owners and hidden activities, receives threats from his former work mates, the scare tactics forcing him back into deadly habits. And Nicole, caught in the middle of it all, befriends a wilderness-dwelling stranger involved in the disappearance of the teenage girl. The fallout for all three is a deadly confrontation with the mill's dark players atop a desolate clearing overlooking the town. A place the locals call Coffin's Reach.

Part Two Background, Definitions, & Literature

Although one may struggle to see the sinew that connects a modern Australian to the criminals transported to British penal colonies during the late 18th century, Australia's criminal history has helped define the cultural representations of the nation, and 'continues to resonate with the public' even today (Pons 2006, 239). This criminographic resonance is arguably only bolstered by the distinct landscape of the country. As non-fiction writer Evan McHugh said:

'[Australia's] sheer size and the fact that it's largely uninhabited creates an environment that presents challenges to criminal investigations rarely encountered in other countries. Where do you begin to look for the suspect, clues or even the victim? How do you cope with the logistics of an investigation that encompasses vast areas?'

(McHugh 2009, viii)

From the shifting crimson deserts to the miry woodlands of the coast, it would seem the iconic landscape of Australia is 'challenging at the best of times' and thus, when a criminal aspect is combined with such a setting, it should be capable of portraying a menace with 'few rivals anywhere else in the world' (McHugh 2009, viii). This link between a menacing landscape and criminality is arguably entrenched in our white cultural history, as even the earliest convicts were faced with a 'strange and difficult world' comprising of 'exotic landforms' (Knight 1997, 15).

A number of international writers have acknowledged the criminal possibilities of an Australian setting, and have set select narratives within the sunburnt country—for example, the outback minefields of *Golden Soak* (1973) by British writer Hammond Innes, or the modern touristic qualities of *The Bat* (1997) by Norwegian writer Jo Nesbø. Long before

these novels were published internationally, however, a number of locally produced works placed crime narratives within Australia.

The first Australian novel, *Quintus Servinton: A tale founded upon Incidents of Real Occurrence* (1830) by Henry Savery, was in fact a crime narrative. Despite being set primarily in Britain², Savery's novel was hugely influential on future Australian fiction, and following its publication a number of crime novels were produced within Colonial Australia (Franks 2012, 96); such titles included Charles Rowcroft's *The Bushranger of Van Diemen's Land* (1846), Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), and Francis Adam's *Madeline Brown's Murder* (1887).

Compared to Savery's antecedent work, many of these inspired texts focused more fully on interpreting Australian Colonial life (Knight 1997, 17). Their stylistics and form, however, were still somewhat indebted to *Quintus Servinton* and its British born writer. Combining 'acute realism with Augustan drollery', the text 'is in some sense an English crime story' rather than a story that 'focuses on and interprets Australian conditions fully' (Knight 1997, 17). Therefore to understand the lineage of crime writing in Australia, and its eventual movement towards something much harder, we must cast our gaze to Britain—the country in which crime writing, arguably, first emerged.

origins

Whether it is Cain slaying Able in *The Bible*, or Lady Macbeth as the prototypical femme fatale in Shakespeare's infamously pernicious Scottish play, scholars have noted many anterior literary connections to modern crime writing (Forshaw 2007, 1). Although these conjunctions are valid to some degree, they should be considered tenuous at best. A more definite genesis of the crime writing form—a genesis that is not only more fully formed but

² The novel shifts focus to the Hobart penal colonies for one eighty page episode.

also prescient of later works—can be found in the 18th century, and the moralistic tales printed by the Newgate Prison in London, England.

First appearing in 1773, the *Newgate Calendar* is an often reprinted collection of ‘cautionary tales in which the perpetrator of a criminal deed is captured, tried, and punished’ (Scaggs 2007, 13-4). The *Calendar* was first produced by the Chaplain of the Newgate Prison, and subsequently many of the stories featured a heavy Christian sentiment, the moralistic underpinnings a sign to the reader that anyone may be forgiven with confession, even if forgiveness arrives just before the noose (Knight 2004, 5).

From a prose perspective, the *Calendar* was typically free of stylistic artifice, with the events of a crime retold in an almost journalistic manner. This can be seen in the following excerpt from the 1828 edition of the *Calendar*, published as *Newgate Calendar; Comprising Interesting Memoirs of the Most Notorious Characters Who Have Been Convicted of Outrages on the Laws of England since the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century; with Occasional Anecdotes and Observations, Speeches, Confessions, and Last Exclamation of Sufferers* (1828).

‘Towards the latter end of August 1810, Robert Roberts was apprehended for being concerned in the many forgeries which for some time had been practiced on the Bank of England and the commercial part of the metropolis...In a few days, in company with another prisoner, of the name of Harper, he effected his escape, and the public were surprised at seeing large printed sheets of paper, pasted on the walls of the city, announcing this extraordinary circumstance, and offering a large reward for their apprehension, but particularly for the discovery of Roberts, the other belonging merely to the gang of smaller rogues.’

(Knapp & Baldwin 1828, 12)

The *Calendar* itself posits that these stories are true tales of those incarcerated within the Newgate prison walls. They were ‘often rewritten in the process of republishing’, however, so the verisimilitude of this claim is somewhat dubious (Knight 2004, 6-9). Regardless, the influence of the *Calendar* upon crime writing is undeniable, particularly the issues published between 1809 and 1826. These versions of the *Calendar*—edited by the lawyers Knapp and Baldwin—indicated a new direction for the publication. Moving away from the theological and metaphysical punishment of the criminal, this evolved version of the *Calendar* began to focus on a more ‘legal frame of reference’ (Knight 2004, 6-9).

In his book *Crime Fiction*, theorist John Scaggs identifies many reoccurring traits of the Knapp and Baldwin *Calendar* as influential on the emerging crime novel, particularly the ‘chance and coincidence that characterizes the apprehension of the criminal’ (Scaggs 2007, 14). Traces of this influence can be seen in British proto-detective novels such as *Pelham; or, Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, where the solution arrives through pursuit rather than the traditional process of detection, and where the complex crime predicts the ‘intricate complications around the corpse’ that were eventually propagated and popularised by later crime texts (Knight 2004, 13).

Around this same time period, American writer Edgar Allan Poe produced three influential short stories that would eventually cement his position as the great-grandfather of the modern detective novel. These stories—‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841), ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogét’ (1842), and ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1844)—all featured the Parisian detective C. Auguste Dupin, who undoubtedly influenced Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s fictional detective Sherlock Holmes (Forshaw 2007, 3). In a turn of intertextual awareness, Poe’s famous protagonist and his faculties of detection are even discussed—albeit dismissively—by Holmes in *A Study of Scarlet* (1887):

“It is simple enough as you explain it,” I said, smiling. “You remind me of Edgar Allen Poe’s Dupin. I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories.”

Sherlock Holmes rose and lit his pipe. “No doubt you think that you are complimenting me in comparing me to Dupin,” he observed. “Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends’ thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour’s silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine.”

(Doyle 2005, 30)

While one may perceive this discussion between Holmes and his companion Watson to be dismissive of Poe’s famous detective, the interaction is most likely a tribute to the original Dupin story ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’. In the story, like Holmes would years later, Dupin questions the investigatory abilities of an influential detective, in this case Vidocq (Poe 2009, 22)—a real world investigator of the time period, who often recorded his exploits for posterity.

Although Poe himself was American, the Dupin short stories took place in France. This European setting allowed Poe’s influence to move ‘far beyond the provincial Stateside streets of Baltimore and Richmond’ (Forshaw 2007, 3), and provided a setting in which the legal perspective of texts such as the *Calendar* could be furthered. With these stories and their non-American setting, Poe was cleverly able to employ ‘existing police and detective forces as a foil to Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin’s analytical genius’ (Scaggs 2007, 19). At the time of their writing, Poe’s three stories would have struggled to exist within a period accurate American setting, as the policing forces were not as yet developed as their Parisian counterparts; in fact, the first Day and Night police in New York was not founded until long after the publication of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, while France had night police from approximately 570 AD (Scaggs 2007, 19).

across the waters

During the Colonial era of Australia (1788-1901), a number of popular British texts concerning criminal activity, including the *Newgate Calendar* and various other proto-detective narratives, were disseminated throughout the fledgling nation. After the success of *Quintus Servinton*, many of the stylistic forms within these British works were emulated by local writers, who adapted them into an Australian setting.

First appearing as short stories in the prominent newspapers of the day—such as *The Bulletin*, *The Australian Town*, and *The Australasian*—these early local crime stories were mostly concerned with bushrangers, convicts, miners, and squatters (Franks 2012, 96), and had a ‘realistic and quite austere’ tonality that was ‘basically in continuity with the criminal histories found in the *Newgate Calendar*’ (Knight 1997, 15-6). This stylistic approach can be seen in Colonial-era short stories such as William Burrows ‘Tales of Adventure by a Log-Fire’ (1859), which features a group of young men telling criminal stories in an anthological format similar to that of the *Calendar*:

‘At a station not far from the Sandhurst Diggings, in the month of July, 195—
[sic], might have been seen a group of young men, wearing the uniform of the mounted police, seated in a log hut,—used as a cooking-house for the station,—round a large comfortable wood fire. It was a miserable rain night, but as they were under orders to turn out as soon as required, and could not do what most of them would gladly have done, namely, go to their beds, they proposed to while away the time by communicating their experience of colonial life to one another.’

(Burrows 2008, 20)

From here the cast of characters begin to tell tales of murder, thievery, and shootouts. A number of these tales end in a retributive manner, with story subjects hung or imprisoned for their crimes. In this way, Burrow’s short story not only replicates the common anthology

format of the *Calendar*, but also the punitive conclusions offered by the Newgate prison itself.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, British crime writing moved away from the often grisly and ghoulish *Newgate* novel, towards the much more urbane ‘clue-puzzle’ mystery. Inarguably, the most definitive writer of this sub-genre was Agatha Christie, whose work has come to define the narrative intricacies and characterisation expected of the form (Forshaw 2007, 22). Building upon the indelible legacy of both Poe’s Dupin and Doyle’s Holmes, Christie’s Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot novels often elevated plot ‘above all considerations’, and prioritised the ‘construction of the puzzle’ over character development (Scaggs 2007, 35). Furthermore, the characters within the narrative were usually disciplined and gentle detectives—a trait arguably first seen in Bulwer-Lytton’s *Pelham* (Knight 2004, 15)—who solved intricate mysteries defined by their ‘inherent playfulness’ rather than grisly criminality (Horsley 2005, 41).

Despite a number of developments within the genre, these clue-puzzle mysteries have maintained popularity in recent years, both in their classic form and in more modern appropriations such as *The Floating Lady Murder* (2000) by Daniel Stashower and the *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (2006) by Gilbert Adair. This continuing public consumption can perhaps be attributed to the original pleasures of Christie’s work. As Barry Forshaw says in *The Rough Guide to Crime Fiction*: ‘it’s those wonderfully engineered plots of Christie’s which still remain as diverting as ever’ (Forshaw 2007, 16).

Not long after the emergence of the clue-puzzle in Britain, a number of local Australian writers began producing crime novels that mirrored aspects of the form. For example, Arthur Upfield’s *The Barrakee Mystery* (1929) and Margot Neville’s³ *Murder in Rockwater* (1945) both took influence from ‘Christie and her colleagues’ (Knight 1997, 81),

³ Actually a collaborative pseudonym for the sisters Anne Neville Goyder and Margot Goyder.

and ‘located the clue-puzzle into...Australia’ (Knight 2004, 104). Despite the popularity of such texts at the time, however, it could be argued that the British clue-puzzle mystery had limited long-term impact on modern crime writing within Australia. Many of the Christie-inspired texts produced at the time ‘veered toward entertainment...with little or no relation to our society’ (Latta 1989, 17), and thus, beyond a few exceptions, there appeared to be overwhelmingly ‘little difference between English and Australian [clue-puzzle] crime writing’ (Latta 1989, 16).

This is not to say all locally produced crime writing of the 19th and early 20th century was indebted to England. Some of our texts, most notably Fergus Hume’s *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886), would go on to be successful in England, and inspire other writers by contributing to the ‘development of the sensation genre’ (Pittard 2007, 39). There were also a number of distinctly local forms being produced. These included, as briefly touched upon earlier, convict stories, goldfield mysteries, squatter thrillers, and criminal sagas, the latter being the ‘most characteristic of the Australian sub-genres’ (Knight 1997, 14). The influence of these local sub-genres continues to linger even today—particularly in regards to the distinct characterisation of the protagonist.

These early Australian crime sub-genres—particularly the criminal saga—often feature a sympathetic admiration for the criminal or anti-hero protagonist, and its ‘origin [can be found] in the heroisation of the bushranger’ (Knight 1997, 14). Notable works within this sub-genre include: *Many Thanks Ben Hasset: An Australian Detective Story* (1915) by Herbert de Hamel, and *The Secret of the Sandhills* (1921) by Arthur Gask. The popularity of such texts within Australia can be attributed to the public ‘resistance of authority [that] became part of the national psyche in the late nineteenth century’—a side effect of a convict nation that had ‘sympathy for the criminal...almost as a matter of faith’ (Knight 1997, 14). This lineage of sympathy undoubtedly arose due to the power structures of Colonial

Australia, the ‘tensions between the gaoled and their gaolers providing an ideal setting for the genesis of avenging outlaw heroes’ (Seal 1996, 120).

The law-breaking protagonists at the heart of these sagas were often lovable rogues with clear parallels to an iconic figure in Australian culture: the larrikin. Much has been written about the historical and cultural lineage of the larrikin, particularly their rise to prominence in the years after World War I, but it is important to establish a clear definition within this project as the idea will be referred to throughout. When referring to the larrikin, I speak of an idealised vision of Australian masculinity: a ‘true blue’⁴ man who often distrusts authority, is ‘quick with his fists, given to salty language and tomfoolery, but with a heart of gold underneath it all’ (Bellanta 2012, xvi); furthermore, he has direct roots to ‘the ironic, laconic and intuitively capable bushman’ (Knight 1997, 136).

Across the Pacific Ocean, an equally iconic male figure was emerging in North America during the early 20th century, and he had many parallels with the Australian larrikin—most notably the distrust of authority. Portrayed as ‘classless and self-reliant’, the protagonists of hard-boiled pulp crime fiction often shied away from ‘traditional roles or bourgeois values’ and found comfort in being a ‘rootless, liminal figure’ (Abbott 2002, 3). Perhaps these character connections explain the sub-genre’s eventual popularity within Australia, its adoption into the national canon, and its continuing influence on local crime writing today.

hard-boiled

In his book *An Introduction to Crime Fiction* (2007), Barry Forshaw identifies the ‘iconographic’ elements of the classic hard-boiled story: ‘private eye with a whisky bottle in the filing cabinet, *femme fatale*, rich—and usually corrupt—clients’ (Forshaw 2007, 33).

⁴ Australian slang for genuine or honest.

These broad elements, particularly the hard-bitten detective at the centre of the narrative, have become culturally familiar over the last six decades or so, mostly thanks to their wider dissemination through hard-boiled film adaptations such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Big Sleep* (1946); comic books like Frank Miller's *Sin City* (1991-2000); and, in recent years, even videogames—most notably the *Max Payne* series (2001-2012). Although each may feature the classic figure of the 'lone investigator cutting through the polished surface of society to reveal the decay beneath' (Forshaw 2007, 33), this is not the only protagonist to feature within classic hard-boiled fiction.

For example, James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) adopts the predominant prose approach of the hard-boiled sub-genre, while featuring a protagonist who is not a private detective. This occurs again in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952), which focuses on a serial killer. Many academics label these texts as noir, the French word for black, and this description essentially 'codifies the dark shadowy atmosphere and setting of hard-boiled' (Scaggs 2005, 69). For such reasons, within this project I use the term hard-boiled to refer to both private investigator narratives and noir.

Regardless of such definitional minutia, the origins of the sub-genre are clear. Hard-boiled crime writing first appeared in the North American pulp fiction magazines published prior to the Second World War. These magazines, dyslogistically named for the wood-pulp paper on which they were printed, were designed as an ephemeral reading experience and were subsequently produced as cheaply as possible. They were often thrown out or passed on once read and, for the most part, were considered 'trash' by the wider educated public and literati (Smith 2000, 19). During the heyday of the industry, hundreds of titles appeared on newsstands around North America, many of them featuring sensationalist covers adorned with tough guys and dames in distress—a marketing approach designed purely to gather the attention of an overwhelmingly male, working-class audience (Smith 2000, 19). Although

described by one historian as ‘schlock turned out to appease a gluttonous mass appetite for sex and sensationalism’ (Smith 2000, 16-7), pulp fiction publications sold extremely well, particularly magazines featuring an emerging style of crime writing known as hard-boiled (Gorrara 2003, 593).

The most influential of these magazines was inarguably *Black Mask* (1920-1951). In the early years of its publication, *Black Mask* featured numerous adventure and Western stories akin to the dime novels popular during the American Civil War (1861-1865). When editorship of the magazine was taken over by Captain Joseph T. Shaw in 1926, however, the identity of the magazine became more solidified. In order to reach a specific and—at the time—untapped market, Shaw encouraged a style of risqué and often colloquial writing. His magazine searched for stories that used ‘economy of expression’ while featuring ‘authenticity in character and action’ (Horsley 2005, 76).

In 1933 Shaw attempted to describe the average reader of his publication. In what seems like a checklist for the attributes of the protagonists the magazine itself helped foster, Shaw said that the men—and note: only men—who purchase his publication are ‘vigorous minded, hard...responsive to the thrill of danger, the stirring exhilaration of clean swift, hard action...[He] knows the song of a bullet. The soft, slithering hiss of a swift thrown knife, the feel of hard fists’ (Smith 2000, 28). Though clearly a romanticised projection of the average *Black Mask* reader, this description acts as a strong guidepost to the style of fiction the magazine published, and the kind of hardened characters that dwelled between the shadows of its pages.

Despite the pulp fiction heritage of these stories, select hard-boiled writers did attain literary legitimacy prior to the Second World War. Famed editor and publisher Alfred Knopf released books under his hardcover Borzoi line of mysteries by hard-boiled crime writers such as Frederick Nebel, George Harmon Coxe, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler

(Smith 2000, 35). In 1939, the paperback company Pocket Books was formed with the exclusive aim of publishing hard-boiled novels, rather than the traditional serialised stories. Similar to *Black Mask* before them, Pocket Books used lurid and violent covers to attract their readers, and offered a novel length narrative for nearly the same price as a single magazine.

With the collapse of the pulp industry in the mid-1940s, these paperbacks became the predominant form of hard-boiled publication (Smith 2000, 25). This shift in distribution would be the first step towards the wider cultural dissemination of the sub-genre, and would arguably herald the second wave of hard-boiled crime writing, a development entitled 'neon noir' by theorist Woody Haut.

hard-boiled literature

Much has been written about the emergence and development of hard-boiled crime writing in North America, and many of these works have been used throughout the project to establish a history of the sub-genre.

Such texts include *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976) by John G. Calweti; *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America: From High Noon to Midnight* (1987) by Cynthia S. Hamilton; *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (2002) by Erin Smith; *The Street was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (2002) by Megan Abbott; *Crime Fiction* (2005) by John Scaggs; *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (2005) by Lee Horsley; and *The Rough Guide to Crime Fiction* (2007) by Barry Forshaw. Obviously this is not every major resource written about the hard-boiled sub-genre, as there are simply far too many to include, but these texts provide a strong cross-section of the numerous social, cultural, and literary conditions from which the sub-genre emerged.

To provide examples of key concepts introduced by these scholarly works, a number of hard-boiled novels have been discussed throughout, including notable works such as: Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), Mickey Spillane's *I, the Jury* (1947), and Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1952). These texts were chosen as they portray intrinsic, yet somewhat varied, aspects of hard-boiled, and are all clearly indebted to the stylistic paradigms fostered by *Black Mask*.

neon noir

First emerging in 1962 with the release of Richard Stark's *The Hunter*, neon noir deals broadly with the hard-boiled paradigms pioneered by the classic *Black Mask* narratives, but evolves them into something far more extreme. Although the term may carry with it certain connotations regarding quality and cultural importance, this shift towards neon noir was inarguably an evolution.

As the stylistic traits of hard-boiled crime fiction were disseminated through film and television during the 60s, 70s, and 80s—in tandem with the rising education standards of the working class—readers of hard-boiled either 'expected more or were subsumed by the promise of...slicker forms of escapism' (Haut 1999, 8); thus hard-boiled pulp fiction was forced to change so as to maintain relevancy. In this way, neon noir is an evolution of the hard-boiled form in the truest sense—it adapted to thrive within a shifting culture. This classification does not imply that neon noir is static, however, and it is quite possible that future developments will eventually lead to a new form of crime writing that has its roots in both neon noir and hard-boiled.

Although still technically part of the hard-boiled sub-genre, this neon noir evolution offers a more modernised view of the form—neon implying an 'electronic culture' (Haut

1999, 4)—and is ostensibly catered to readers ‘feeling increasingly more powerless in a society saturated by street and state crime, whether it be muggings, drive-by killings, insider dealing, or foreign invasions’ (Haut 1999, 5). Notable works feature themes of the time period: paranoia ‘exacerbated by government secrecy, inflexible policies, and the effect of drugs on the political consciousness of numerous dissidents’ (Haut 1999, 4). In his book *Neon Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (1999), Woody Haut attempts to further delineate the attributes of the sub-genre evolution:

‘[Neon noir writers have] produced narratives which investigate the relationship between public and private crime. Striving for realism and accessibility, their work is typified by a straightforward prose style, tinged, in many cases, with vernacularisms and a dark and irreverent humour. Battling the bottle, drug-addled, or beaten down by society, neon noir protagonists are no longer wise-cracking know-it-alls, but psychologically scarred inhabitants of a morally ambiguous world in which people are capable of perpetrating any and every outrage.’

(Haut 1999, 4-5)

Obviously it is quite difficult to summarise the complexity of neon noir into a single paragraph—hence why Haut has devoted a book to outlining the evolution—but this extract defines the type of fiction that will be discussed throughout this project.

It must be clarified, however, that while neon noir is undoubtedly a contemporary mode of crime writing, the evolution often analyses the past. This can be seen perhaps most prominently in James Ellroy’s work, particularly his L.A. Quartet. The four novels that comprise this quartet—*The Black Dahlia* (1987), *The Big Nowhere* (1988), *L.A. Confidential* (1990), and *White Jazz* (1992)—are all crime novels that take place in Los Angeles between 1947 and 1959, and almost create an alternate history for the city. Despite this habit of mythologising the past, Ellroy’s work is indisputably modern in its styling and social

criticism. LA urban archaeologist Mike Davis notes that Ellroy's work often 'feels like the actual moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era'; perhaps, as Haut notes, because 'it *is* the moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era' (Haut 1999, 151).

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that the characters, subject matter, and setting of neon noir are treated with a greater sense of realism than the often-romanticised anterior *Black Mask* style stories. It could even be argued that the traditional hard-boiled narrative offers 'amorphous' depictions of violent metropolis living that are ultimately 'parodies of the culture', while these later second-wave texts are 'seemingly so authentic as to reinterpret the national narrative'—essentially becoming prurient 'quasi-anthropological texts' (Haut 1999, 2-3). In this way, neon noir narratives often become a vehicle for greater social criticism, the plots providing a platform for the discussion of wider issues such as institutional corruption, sexual taboo, and the ravages of capitalism. This should come as no surprise, because as Haut himself says, 'To examine a culture, one need only investigate its crimes. Thus the fictionalisation of crime has become a favourite pastime and means of analysing society' (Haut 1999, 3).

Although neon noir still maintains its popularity and production up to today, the North American evolution arguably reached its zenith with the release of James Ellroy's novel *White Jazz*, the text's 'fragmented assault' so fierce that the 'crime novel would have to reassess its place in the culture' after its release (Haut 1999, 10). One need only read the opening telegraphic passage of the novel to see the sheer extremity of the work:

'The job: take down a bookie mill, let the press in – get some ink to compete with the fight probe.

Some fruit sweating a sodomy beef snitched: fourteen phones, a race wire. Exley's memo said show some force, squeeze the witnesses at the hotel later – find out what the Feds had planned.

In person: 'If things get untoward, don't let the reporters take pictures. You're

an attorney, Lieutenant. Remember how clean Bob Gallaudet likes his cases.’’

(Ellroy 1992, 11)

This almost feverishly paranoid style of writing can be located in the social discontent brought forth by the ‘lethargy, cover-ups and crimes’ of post-Vietnam America, almost as if the text itself was a ‘chapter in a survivalist’s handbook’ (Haut 1999, 2-3). Regardless of the reason for such an evolution, it is clear the North American hard-boiled sub-genre has strayed from its original *Black Mask* roots, into something far more fierce and socially aware. This evolution, however, has yet to clearly occur within the localised Australian form.

neon noir literature

Although closely linked to the hard-boiled sub-genre, little has been written about North American neon noir beyond the seminal work of Woody Haut. For this reason his book will be the primary source of information employed when discussing the evolution.

Despite this monopoly on neon noir analysis, a number of other academics within the crime writing field have seemingly noted a shift between classic hard-boiled and the more modern and realistic neon noir—usually in regards to James Ellroy. For example, in his book *Crime Fiction 1800-2000* (2004), Stephen Knight writes: ‘Ellroy’s enterprise is a much more credible account of crime in southern California than was provided by the private-eye writers, including Hammett’ (Knight 2004, 200). Subsequently, a number of crime fiction scholars, including those already listed in the hard-boiled sub-section, will be used to compliment the discussion of specific neon noir fiction.

These works of fiction include: *The Hunter* (1962) and *Butcher’s Moon* (1974) by Richard Stark; *The Sins of the Fathers* (1976) by Lawrence Sanders; *City Primeval* (1980) by Elmore Leonard; *L.A. Confidential* (1990) and *White Jazz* (1993) by James Ellroy, and *The Long-Legged Fly* (1992) by James Sallis. They have been selected due to their inclusion and

identification in Haut's original survey, and because of their regular analysis in the wider critical field of crime writing, even in works that do not use the neon noir terminology.

There are a small number of popular female neon noir authors in what is a predominately male dominated evolution, but I have not drawn on their texts for a number of reasons. Firstly, scholarly research focused on such writing is just beginning to emerge, which makes it difficult to academically contextualise such texts within the scope of this project. And secondly, much of the neon noir written by female authors focuses on reinterpreting or exploring the strictures of classic hard-boiled, and the books are often focused more fully on the paradigms of the *Black Mask* form (Haut 1999, 97). This can be seen in a novel such as Megan Abbott's *Queenpin* (2007), which recasts the classic noir narrative with a female protagonist, putting a 'feminist spin on the proceedings' (Sergio 2012, para. 3).

This reimagining or subverting of past structures can be seen as an attempt to reclaim a space within the pulp culture, as often female authors in the early 20th century were expected to write stories featuring male detectives, and to use masculine pseudonyms when publishing for hard-boiled magazines (Smith 2010, 29). One female editor of *Black Mask* was even forced to use her initials in order to 'project a masculine image' for the predominately male readership (Smith 2010, 28-9). Regardless, this tendency to explore the limits of the classic hard-boiled structure—arguably in an attempt to challenge the 'notion of the detective as hero-investigator' (Haut 1999, 97)—does not fall within the purview of the project, but does provide a space for possible future research.

transpacific blood-stains

In the years following World War II, the public consumption of crime writing within Australia maintained prevalence. Many established crime fiction writers experienced

continued success, while the development of a localised pulp magazine industry allowed new writers to contribute to the genre. During the war, American magazines such as *Black Mask* were brought into the country by stationed American soldiers, and were swapped between local civilians and troops. Despite their sudden popularity, however, these magazines could not be imported legitimately due to a tariff on American imports that was introduced by the Australian government in 1939 (Johnson-Woods 2004, 74).

Local publishing houses such as Transport, Currawong, and Horwitz sprung up with the intention of filling this literary void, and began producing a variety of pulp fiction, including westerns, sci-fi adventures, and hard-boiled inspired crime sagas. The popular American pulp magazines influenced these early localised hard-boiled stories overtly, and subsequently the settings were often an idealised metropolis where Australian landscape idioms were ‘strained into silence, or near silence’ (Knight 1997, 166), or took place outside of Australia entirely.

This absence of a distinct Australian landscape can be seen in the many novels of Carter Brown—a pseudonym for Australian based writer Alan G. Yates—which first appeared in the early 1950s. Recognising the success of imported American hard-boiled pulp magazines, the ‘Horwitz editorial team developed the idea of a one-author crime fiction series to cash in on the popularity of American hard-boiled writers such as Mickey Spillane’ (Johnson-Woods 2008, 164).

Alan G. Yates, a British expatriate who had written a number of novels for Horwitz’s Scientific Thriller line, was approached to develop this one-author crime fiction series. Although extremely popular within Australia, these Carter Brown novels were *faux* American (Johnson-Woods 2004, 74), placing the action and characters in Hollywood, New York, and Miami. Even with such iconic transpacific settings, this foreign environment is rarely

extrapolated upon within the novels—the text giving us only the sparsest of details. For example, in *The Dame* (1959):

‘It was one-thirty in the afternoon when I parked the Healey outside the Sheriff’s office. Lunch seemed like a good idea...So I detoured to the drugstore around the corner and had a sandwich built to my own specification, and some coffee.’

(Brown 1977, 58)

Perhaps this lack of detail could be linked to Yate’s inexperience with the setting itself; he had written over thirty novels set in America before even visiting the country. In his 1985 *New York Times* obituary, it was noted that Yates ‘chose American settings because Australians [of the time] preferred them’ (New York Times para. 4, 1985). Interestingly, despite being the original home of crime fiction, Britain similarly struggled to localise the form, their published texts, much like Brown, were ‘primarily imitations of American tough guy and gangster pulps’; this can be seen in the ‘brit grit’ novels that appeared in England during the late 40s and early 50s, produced by pseudonymous authors such as Ben Sarto, Darcy Glinto and Hank Janson (Horsley 2002, para. 1-3).

With the release of Peter Corris’ 1980 novel *The Dying Trade*, however, a more wholly localised version of hard-boiled was introduced to Australia, the author quickly becoming the ‘main agent in establishing the possibility of a genuinely Australian private eye’ protagonist (Knight 1997, 136). Featuring the reoccurring private detective Cliff Hardy, the novel takes place in metropolitan Sydney and the surrounding areas, the character ‘noting places, their traditions, their peculiarities’ (Knight 1997, 167).

Despite this distinctively local setting, it must be noted that Hardy’s intimate and sometimes dangerous relationship with the city is ‘firmly based on American models’, and that Hardy is ultimately a transplantation of the ‘Californian private eye’, which was

popularised by North American *Black Mask* authors such as Raymond Chandler (Knight 1997, 168). This influence of *Black Mask* era hard-boiled can still be felt in Australia today, with a number of more recent crime novels continuing the established traditions in a localised setting; such novels include Peter Temple's *Bad Debts* (1996) and Chris Nyst's *Crook as Rookwood* (2005).

Building upon this classic inspiration, and furthermore upon the pioneering work of Hardy himself, a number of neon noir inspired Australian crime novels have begun to emerge in recent years. Elements of the sub-genre evolution can be seen in Garry Disher's *Kickback* (1991), Peter Temple's *Truth* (2007), and Zane Lovitt's *The Midnight Promise* (2013). Whether such texts truly localise the neon noir form into an Australian setting, however, is up for debate, as often these texts only employ very select attributes, while effectively contradicting or shying away from others. Conversely, some texts will embrace a majority of neon noir attributes, but the American influence is clear, and the distinct elements of the country itself are strained 'into silence, or near silence' (Knight 1997, 166).

australian literature

Locally produced research on Australian crime writing has been scarce until the last two decades or so, which unfortunately means there is little written about Australian hard-boiled or a possible evolution into neon noir. There are some peripheral references to the initial emulation in book chapters such as 'The Mysterious Case of Carter Brown: Or, Who Really Killed the Australian Author?' (2004) by Toni Johnson-Woods, or 'Issues of Class and Gender in Australian Crime Fiction: From the 1950s to Today' (2012) by Rachel Franks, but neither discuss neon noir in direct or indirect terms.

Perhaps the greatest survey of locally produced crime fiction, including hard-boiled, has been undertaken by academic Stephen Knight, who has published a number of books and

articles on the subject and is often considered the ‘leading expert’ on Australian crime fiction (Myers 2011, para. 1). Although his work does not discuss the Australian neon noir novel, his research is used throughout this project to elucidate a historical understanding of Australian produced crime writing—specifically his books *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction* (1997) and *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2004), and his article ‘Peter Temple: Australian Crime Fiction on the World Stage’ (2011).

To reinforce my discussion on how neon noir attributes have been employed selectively by Australian authors, I have included a number of prominent Australian crime novels. In the context of this project, an Australian novel refers specifically to those that take place within the country itself—regardless of whether the author is naturalised. While this definition may be perceived as problematic within certain research frameworks, it is based upon a very similar definition outlined by Knight in his seminal *Continent of Mystery* (Knight 1997, 3). These Australian texts include: *The Dying Trade* (1980) by Peter Corris; *Kickback* (1993) by Garry Disher; *The Broken Shore* (2007) and *Truth* (2009) by Peter Temple; *Line of Sight* (2010) and *Zero to the Bone* (2013) by David Whish-Wilson; and *The Midnight Promise* (2013) by Zane Lovitt.

Part Three **Contribution to Knowledge**

This project offers an Australian neon noir novel, and a related thesis that explores a number of questions driving the research and fiction. What are the difficulties and considerations of localising neon noir to Australia? Do the conventions of the sub-genre shift when placed in an Australian setting? Why, despite a strong history of national crime writing, do Australian authors often shy away from fully embracing the form? What does this reluctance reveal?

By addressing such questions, this research and creative work will act as a foundation for other academics and creative writers to begin exploring the analytical possibilities of a localised neon noir form, as traditionally the evolution has displayed an ability to critique the ‘warp and woof of society’ in a way that is accessible for the general reader (Haut 1999, 11). This critical ability is interesting to consider within a country such as Australia, as the general populace of the nation is arguably hesitant to engage with cultural or political issues.

Writing for *The Age* (2014) journalist Sam de Brito compared the population of Australia to traditional ‘idiots’—‘the ancient Greek word *idiotes*, from which the English version is derived, meant one who put private pleasures before public duty and who was, for this reason, ignorant of everything that mattered’ (de Brito 2014, para. 17). Furthermore, according to *How Do Australians Imagine Their Democracy?*, a report investigating political engagement within the country, ‘citizens are overwhelmingly observers rather than participants’ in the political process, and that a general social and political ‘malaise’ exists within our culture (ANZOG 2013, 3).

Crime fiction has often ‘been adapted...to reflect on local issues’, and thus, to some degree, the narrative’s location ‘has become so important that it is suggested that nationality be ascribed not to the author, but to the locus criminis of the novel itself’ (King 2015, para. 9). Through my research and creative practice, I have begun to explore the distinct

possibilities of a localised iteration of neon noir—including its abilities to vivisection the cultural landscape. Although set in the past, my creative work *Coffin's Reach* subtly deals with a number of social issues still relevant to modern Australia: institutional corruption, government cover-ups, and, perhaps most importantly, police violence—the latter an issue that still makes regular headlines in Queensland today.

These thematic elements, while integral to the overall aesthetic, do not wholly define the novel. Instead they are delivered to the reader through an accessible, populist narrative that does not negate the 'inner workings of the genre' (Haut 1999, 11). In a nation where the general public are often avoiding social and political engagement, I believe we need more subversive ways of opening up public discourse. And, as already discussed by Haut, 'To examine a culture, one need only investigate its crimes' (Haut 1999, 3).

CHAPTER TWO

Shooting the Works

'Listen to me. These are hard, tough streets, and you are not hard enough or tough enough. You better get a straight job because you can't make it out here, you're too soft for it. You think it's easy out here, but it's harder than you ever knew, and now's your chance to learn it.'

— Lawrence Block, *The Sins of the Fathers*

'He felt like somebody had taken the lid off life and let him see the works.'

— Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

Part One **Character**

In his book *Writing Fiction*, Garry Disher outlines the importance of character, noting that it allows an author to ‘enter, tell and shape their novels and stories, express ideas, and drive and develop plots’ (Disher 2001, 45). In short, for many writers, character is an entryway into the creative work, and allows them to explore the boundaries of the narrative.

As a fiction writer, my process for developing a primary character is built around establishing their corporeal and incorporeal features, so as to understand how they feature in their own story, and the wider narrative. When considering the corporeal, I contemplate how a character may physically appear in the fictional world, how this physicality impacts their nature, and how other characters perceive and react to them. In contrast, incorporeal focuses on the internal elements of the character—how they think, how they feel, what motivates them, etc.

This dichotomous approach to developing character was used in the earliest planning stages of *Coffin’s Reach*, and provides the general structure for the content of this sub-chapter. Obviously, within the context of the project, there is neither the space nor time to examine every facet of neon noir characterisation. Therefore only the most reoccurring character attributes are discussed. Furthermore, due to similar limitations, my analysis is focused primarily on the protagonists of neon noir, and not secondary characters—the latter, while important to the overall story, often act simply as a ‘goal’, ‘influence’, or perhaps even hindrance for the main character (Disher 2001, 45).

Corporeal

Traditionally the ‘the investigating character [of a crime novel] is the least constrained of all characters’ (Walters 1996, 70), and can therefore manifest in a variety of differing forms.

Despite such textual freedom, a number of reoccurring elements unite the classic hard-boiled private investigator. He is typically a ‘solitary white man...heterosexual, and without family or close ties, he navigates his way through urban spaces figured as threatening, corrupt’ (Abbott 2002, 2). Many of these characteristics stem from the expectations of the readership, which, as discussed earlier, were overwhelmingly working-class males.

While some neon noir novels continued to feature this archetype as central to their narrative, many more eschewed key elements—perhaps most notably the character’s private investigator lineage. Neon noir writer James Ellroy best summarises the reasons for this shift, loosely quoting the procedural writer Ed McBain: ‘The last time a private-eye solved a case was never’ (Haut 1999, 130). Suddenly freed from the romanticism of the lonely private investigator, neon noir’s ‘obsession with verisimilitude-at-street-level meant it could portray the underclass, ethnic groups and subcultures with greater reality’; furthermore, it could depict such characters ‘with greater sympathy’ and an ‘intelligence equal to, if not greater than, the average politician and pundit’ (Haut 1999, 130).

For such reasons, a number of neon noir novels began to feature non-traditional protagonists like the Hispanic cop Raymond Cruz in Elmore Leonard’s *City Primeval*; or the scholarly African American freelancer Lew Griffin in James Sallis’ *The Long-Legged Fly*. Regardless of developments in race, gender, and profession, the characters of neon noir do continue an established physical element of hard-boiled. Overwhelmingly, characters within the evolution exude a dangerous visage that is often complimented by their acts of violence.

hard-boiled

Although general critical consensus credits Dashiell Hammett as the primary force behind the development of the classic hard-boiled sub-genre (Knight 2001, 110), it was arguably the

early *Black Mask* writer Carroll John Daly who created the prototypical hard-boiled protagonist—most notably with the reoccurring private investigator Race Williams.

First appearing in the anti-Ku Klux Klan short story *The Knights of the Open Palm* published in a 1923 issue of *Black Mask*, Race Williams is described as a ‘large, tough, violent man’ and arguably inspired a number of future gumshoes, including Mickey Spillane’s tough-as-nails Mike Hammer (Scaggs 2007, 55). In fact, towards the end of his life Daly was somewhat annoyed about Spillane’s eventual success, saying: ‘I’m broke...and this guy gets rich writing about my detective’ (Server 1993, 65).

Like a number of hard-boiled protagonists to appear after him, Williams is an often violent man who ‘is defined by his ability to both inflict, and stoically endure, physical punishment’ (Scaggs 2007, 64):

‘It’s the point of view in life that counts. For an ordinary man to get a bullet through his hat as he walked home at night would be something to talk about for years. Now, with me; just the price of a new hat—nothing more. The only surprise would be for the lad who fired the gun. He and his relatives would come in for a slow ride, with a shovel-full of dirt at the end of it...a sharp eye, a quick draw, and a steady trigger finger drove me into the game. Also you might add to that an aptitude for getting out of trouble almost as quickly as I get into it.’

(Daly in Sutherland 2011, 546-7)

This imposing and often violent characterisation was continued into the early work of Hammett, where he ostensibly cemented the hard-boiled protagonist template with his sub-genre defining novel *Red Harvest*, which is the ‘acknowledged core of *Black Mask*’ (Knight 2004, 114). Within the novel, others describe the nameless protagonist as ‘hard-boiled, pig-headed’, and he even comments on his own physically imposing stature: ‘Some of my hundred and ninety pounds were fat, but not all of them’ (Hammett 2003, 14).

This hard-boiled physicality reaches its zenith in the work of Mickey Spillane, where Mike Hammer's imposing nature overflows from an oftentimes-simple description into an orgy of violence:

'I clamped down and kicked back. The table went sailing as my feet caught it...The knife came out again and this time I got the hand in a wristlock and twisted. The tendons stretched, and the bone snapped sickeningly. The high yellow let out a scream and dropped the knife. I was on my feet in a flash.'

(Spillane 2006, 48)

This almost exploitative violence is unsurprising when one considers the 'anti-intellectual stance' that characterises Spillane's 'violent, right-wing, [and] misogynistic' protagonist (Scaggs 2007, 64). The character's violence would later be vivisected and examined by neon noir writers such as James Ellroy, who freely admits the author's influence on his formative years: 'Mike Hammer, Ellroy says, "brutalised bad men and saved virtuous women. Mike Hammer's quest became my moral credo," although the young Ellroy felt squeamish about Hammer's misogyny' (Mancall 2013, 85).

Despite the grisly nature of such acts, the violence in hard-boiled pulp fiction was often romanticised to some degree by the author. This is most noticeable in the work of Raymond Chandler, where the reoccurring protagonist of Marlowe is identified as a modern knight errant—the violent actions undertaken during his quest contributing to a 'romantic sensibility' (Scaggs 2007, 61). This aura of hard-boiled romanticism is an idea that will be touched upon throughout the project, and is examined in greater detail later in this sub-chapter.

Hard-boiled's obsession with violent and physically imposing protagonists, whether they be romanticised or not, can be traced back to the general consumers of early pulp fiction. As already briefly discussed in the opening chapter of this project, the working class were the

primary readership of magazines such as *Black Mask*, and they often read the contained stories for very particular reasons:

‘Pulp fiction was less about crime and the process of detection than about the hard-boiled private eye’s struggles for autonomy at work, his skill at reading class and social position from details of dress and décor, his manly physical and rhetorical prowess...’

(Smith 2000, 17)

Although it is impossible for us to fully understand the specifics of how these readers made sense of classic hard-boiled, some aspects are clear. Due to their social status and gender in the time period, it can be assumed that these readers were ‘preoccupied with obtaining and keeping jobs that earned a family wage and with asserting a manliness defined by physical strength’ (Smith 2000, 16-7).

neon noir

As clear descendants of the ‘hard-boiled pulp culture’ pioneered by magazines such as *Black Mask* (Haut 1999, 4), neon noir writers continued to play with characters that were both physically imposing and oftentimes violent, but stretched these attributes to their absolute breaking point. This is clear even in the first neon noir text, *The Hunter* by Richard Stark.

‘His hands, swinging curve-fingered at his side, looked like they were moulded of brown clay by a sculptor who thought big and liked veins. His hair was brown and dry and dead, blowing around his head like a poor toupee about to fly loose. His face was a chipped chunk of concrete, with eyes of flawed onyx. His mouth was a quick stroke, bloodless. His suit coat fluttered behind him, and his arms swung easily as he walked.’

(Stark 2008, 4)

The language in this extract paints a vivid, if somewhat unlikeable, image of the professional thief Parker—his hair is ‘dry and dead’, his face is like a ‘chipped chunk of concrete’, and his mouth is ‘bloodless’. Such descriptors are intentional, painting the character as almost inhuman; perhaps something far more ‘Cold-blooded...primeval’ (Haut 1999, 33). This physical state is clear to secondary characters in the narrative, with a number of them noting his latent violence:

‘The office women looked at him and shivered. They knew he was a bastard, they knew his big hands were born to slap with, they knew his face would never break into a smile when he looked at a woman. They knew what he was, they thanked God for their husbands, and still they shivered.’

(Stark 2008, 4)

This tangible presence of violence is not limited to Parker’s physical appearance, however, but is also apparent in his cold and detached personal interactions, which are almost as blunt and shocking as the character himself:

‘Puzzled, Shevelly opened the door and climbed out onto the thin grass next to the curb. He took a step to the sidewalk and turned around to face the car again.

Parker leaned far to the right, aiming the pistol out at arm’s length in front of him, the line of the barrel sighted on Shevelly’s head. Shevelly read his intention and suddenly thrust his hands out protectively in front of himself, shouting, “I’m only the messenger!”

“Now you’re the message,” Parker told him, and shot him.’

(Stark 2011, 169)

This violent physicality continues throughout neon noir and can be seen in the ‘no-bullshit Old West lawman’ persona of Raymond Cruz in *City Primeval* (Leonard 2005, 13); the ‘muscle guy’ violence of Bud White in *L.A. Confidential* (Ellroy 1997, 43); and even the

often passive freelance investigator Matthew Scudder is quick to reveal his true nature, perhaps most notably and eloquently at the midway point of *The Sins of the Fathers*:

‘He went for it and that was a mistake because it landed behind him and he had to scramble for it...He never got within ten feet of it. He was off balance and scrambling, and I got a hand on his shoulder and spun him like a top. I threw a right, my hand open, and I caught him with the heel of my hand right under the nose. He yelped and put both hands to his face, and I hit him three or four times in the belly. When he folded up I cupped my hands on the back of his head and brought my knee up while I was bringing his head down.’

(Block 2001, 192)

This continued obsession with violent and physically imposing protagonists makes sense in the broader context of the neon noir evolution. By highlighting the extremity of their protagonists, and in essence mapping the ‘cause and effect of violence’ (Haut 1999, 129), neon noir writers portray protagonists that are no longer ‘necessarily good or moral’ (Haut 1999, 132)—creating a world where ‘everyone is a potential criminal’ (Haut 1999, 129), including the main character.

australia

Across the Pacific Ocean, a number of post war crime novels echoed the broader aspects of the North American hard-boiled model—perhaps most successfully Peter Corris’ 1980 novel *The Dying Trade*, which introduced readers to the reoccurring private investigator, ex-boxer, and heavy drinker Cliff Hardy. A number of Hardy’s character traits follow the conventions of the hard-boiled model: he is an isolated, white, heterosexual male with an ability ‘to both inflict, and stoically endure, physical punishment’ (Scaggs 2007, 64):

‘We were side by side when we reached the next door on the right. I hunched myself and cannoned into him blasting him against the wall. I opened the door and stepped in. He recovered fast and moved towards me. When he was half-way through the opening, I swung the door back full into him. He took some of it in the face, some at the knee and the handle in the solar plexus. He collapsed like a skyscraper in an earthquake.’

(Corris 2012, 45)

These familiar elements of characterisation are unsurprising when one remembers that ‘Corris’ skill has been to combine the broad structures of the mainstream American private eye...with a traditional Australian male stereotype’ (Knight 1997, 136). Arguably, these stereotypical qualities, though true to the nation of production, soften the hard edges of the character as the series progresses (Knight 1997, 137). This softening can be linked to the shifting attitudes of the time, and Hardy’s portrayal as an ‘egalitarian...larrikin’ (Nette 2015, para. 6). Charles Waterstreet describes the effect of such characterisation in a foreword to *The Dying Trade*: ‘When we read Corris, we see ourselves, we laugh at ourselves, we cringe at ourselves, and finally we understand ourselves a little better’ (Waterstreet in Corris 2012, x).

Much like how Lawrence Block’s neon noir investigator Matthew Scudder can be considered a harder version of Raymond Chandler’s influential gumshoe Phillip Marlowe, Peter Temple’s Jack Irish ‘can be read as a harder version of Peter Corris’s medium-tough urban detective Cliff Hardy’ (Knight 2011, 73). First appearing in the 1996 novel *Bad Debts*, the Irish series often deals with a number of neon noir elements reminiscent of authors such as James Ellroy—most notably how the metropolitan Melbourne setting acts as an ‘urban crucifix’ to explore entrenched corruption (Knight 2011, 75).

Despite these familiar elements, however, the physicality of the character hardly embodies the violence typically associated with neon noir. Described as fitting the clothes of a ‘bigish fella’, Irish feels awkward in regards to his physical capabilities; for example, he

perceives himself as a ‘big monkey’ when struggling across a ladder lying between two rooftops, and earlier he is ‘winded’ after knocking out a single man with a lead pipe (Temple 2012a, 281-2). This non-violent characterisation is a trait continued throughout a number of Temple’s novels, including those that exude far more overt links to the neon noir evolution. In *The Broken Shore*, the main character Joe Cashin’s injuries limit his physical capability, and Villani in *Truth*, much like Irish, has a little ‘flab’ that leaves him ‘sagged...trying to breathe’ after a physical confrontation (Temple 2009, 154-5).

In direct contrast to Peter Temple’s protagonists, this neon noir expectation for violent physicality can be found in Garry Disher’s reoccurring thief protagonist Wyatt. Debuting in the standover⁵ heist novel *Kickback*, Gary Disher’s Wyatt has been the protagonist of over seven critically acclaimed works published in Australia over the last two decades. Described as a thin-featured man who is ‘attractive on the rare occasions he smiled or was lifted by some kind of emotion’ (Disher 2010, 4), the mononymous Wyatt is an old-fashioned thief who lauds precision on the job, and is more than willing to use deadly force when necessary—particularly if someone double crosses him:

‘Their heads were level with the top step. Wyatt screwed plugs into his ears, stepped away from the bench and shot Eddie twice in the chest. The force threw Eddie back, but the reaction of the first constable was to protect him, grab his upper arms and manoeuvre Eddie out the line of fire. The other did the opposite, trying to insert Eddie between himself and danger. With all of that pushing and shoving, Eddie’s chin jerked back, then slumped forward, giving Wyatt a perfect kill shot to the top of the skull.’

(Disher 2010, 193)

⁵ Term commonly used in crime fiction to describe the robbery of a criminal by a peer.

Despite such clear violent physicality, the Wyatt character is very reminiscent of Richard Stark's similarly mononymous Parker. Such parallels are no secret, however, as Disher 'freely admit[s] that the idea for Wyatt owes a lot to Richard Stark's character' (Disher n.a., para. 5). This influence is even acknowledged within the novels themselves, with the seventh book in the series *Wyatt* (2010) making numerous references to Stark's oeuvre: Wyatt encounters a woman named Stark (Disher 2010, 36); a man named Parker (Disher 2010, 2000); and he even dwells in Westlake towers, a tribute to Donald Westlake the author behind the Stark penname (Disher 2010, 259).

Perhaps a more traditionally 'Australian' neon noir protagonist can be found in the character of Frank Swann, who first appeared in David Whish-Wilson's *Line of Sight*. Set in Western Australia during the 1970s, Superintendent Frank Swann is going up against the corrupt police, while simultaneously investigating the connected murder of a brothel madam. Ostracised by his comrades for betraying the blue brotherhood, Swann reveals his violent nature in a confrontation with a low-level goon:

'Then he was up and coming at Swann again, who fended off the knife feints and waited for the big lunge. He caught it on the follow-through and this time got behind Davey and brought up the knife arm...He knew he had him now, and he smashed his face into the door frame, bringing Davey's arm up all the way and forcing him back to the floor. He could feel the sinew rip and the collarbone pop...Swann knew he had gone too far, but no voice was calling him back. The walls closed in like grey waves and then the revolver was in his hand and he too was on his knees, in the blood, pushing home the stubnose barrel and shouting at the top of his voice, daring Davey to show him the colour of his eyes.'

(Whish-Wilson 2012, 146-7)

Beyond this violent capability, however, Swann is described as a relatively cheerful and social character, and is seemingly perceived in the same manner by others:

‘During the daytime, he was still more or less himself, optimistic by nature, in spite of everything, a man who generally liked people and was liked in turn. People spoke to him, looked him in the eye, shook his hand, told him to keep it up, keep going. And he needed that support in order to go on, needed the encouragement of strangers, ordinary people who knew what he was up against.’

(Whish-Wilson 2010, 38)

Swann’s characterisation, an optimistic man who ‘generally liked people and was liked in turn’, arguably betrays the violence expected of the neon noir protagonist. Although physically capable in dire situations, Swann in general is an affable character with many close friends—this last element furthermore betrays the expected isolation of a neon noir protagonist, and is an idea that will be discussed in detail later in this sub-chapter.

Despite sometimes featuring flashes of violent characterisation in their work, it would seem that many Australian crime authors, even those with neon noir influences, are unwilling to stray too far from the larrikin—our ‘ironic, laconic...image of Australian masculinity’ (Knight 1997, 136). This is perhaps due to our tendency to exude ‘sympathy for the criminal...almost as a matter of faith’ (Knight 1997, 14). Although neon noir typically blurs the line between hero and criminal through the violent nature of the protagonist, perhaps local writers are afraid to portray their characters as too violent, lest they make them unsympathetic.

coffin’s reach

Pinpointing the origin of *Coffin’s Reach*, and the characters contained within, is difficult, as the creative process is oftentimes abstract and near ‘impossible to define in words’ (Bohm

2000, 1). This unclear origin is only worsened by the sheer longevity of the project, which first emerged upon my discovery of crime writing years ago now. In fact, many core elements of *Coffin's Reach* appeared in a brief piece of writing started almost half a decade ago, at the time entitled *All Things Burning*.

Regardless of the project's unclear origin, the lineage is clear, as I still possess some of the original artefacts from this very early planning stage. Often when outlining my characters, I will write down ideas on coloured system cards—each colour representing a separate character. Sometimes the notes on these cards will pertain to a character's history; oftentimes it will simply be a physical description. This process is intrinsic to my method, and provides a retrospective window into my thought processes during the early stages of the project that eventually became *Coffin's Reach*.

One of the first notes on Royce's yellow system card is a simple physical description: 'Lean, sinewy like a dingo. Can be just as vicious when he needs to be. But fresh-faced; an everyman for the reader, but not ocker⁶.' These scraps of thought, although inarguably diffuse due to infancy, do hint towards a larger character concern that would dominate the writing process of *Coffin's Reach*, not only in regards to the character of Royce: how do I balance the physically violent expectations of neon noir without alienating a reader used to the far more likeable larrikin figure? By connecting the violent nature, both enacted and perceived, of each primary character to a desperate and oftentimes inescapable situation, they are able to exhibit elements of neon noir violence—albeit in a manner which can be justified by a reader familiar with more traditionally sympathetic protagonists.

Although all three main characters of *Coffin's Reach* are integral to the success of the wider narrative, Royce was written as a lynchpin for the reader. He provides the reader with an avenue to enter the world of the Well, as he, just like them, are new and unfamiliar to its

⁶ Australian slang typically associated with the larrikin archetype.

idiosyncrasies, its geography, and its corruption. Thus I knew it integral for the reader to sympathise with the character, and feel some kind of affinity for him—even though he may, on occasion, have to display physical violence.

The narrative of *Coffin's Reach* was constructed to display Royce's violence numerous times. Whether it be the pub fight (*Coffin's Reach*, 229), the masked assault in the cane fields (*Coffin's Reach*, 430), or the final confrontation with McIntyre in the abandoned mine (*Coffin's Reach*, 481), Royce's physical prowess is clear. This physicality is even acknowledged later in the text when he first meets Bluey, the publican noting this violence: 'Punch like that, you could make a killing in the bantams. Maybe heavier if you got some grub in you.' (*Coffin's Reach*, 273).

From a strictly physical perspective, the original iteration of Royce was far less physically imposing:

'Afterwards, Royce headed to the shower. As he stepped out onto the tile he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror: sharp cheekbones pointing to full lips, eyes a glacial blue. He was never going to be a movie star, but Royce had his father's looks—enough to leave the young female cadets back in Brisbane asking for him after his transfer. Or so Royce had heard.'

(*Coffin's Reach*, early draft)

In this earlier draft, while still lean and sinewy, Royce is more traditionally handsome—almost noble, like a knight in a classic fable. Upon retrospection this physical appearance came from trepidation to make Royce overtly intimidating, perhaps to avoid him blurring with Farrow. I was always unhappy with the character's appearance, however, as I believe it over romanticised him—in essence contradicting the evolution's obsession with verisimilitude (Haut 1999, 4).

As my research progressed and I ruminated on the character, I began to realise that a physically imposing nature, if carefully planned, could help the reader sympathise with Royce. After some brief experimentation, the scene above was rewritten:

‘Stepping out of the shower, Royce caught his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. He had grown skinny over the last couple of months, his appetite waning with the stress of work and his lack of sleep. Royce had played Aussie Rules religiously as a teenager, and it had left him lean and strong for his first years on the force. But now his dark eyes were set deep into the skull, his hairless cheeks stretched like a drum. The changes left him looking angry and feral, almost as if his face was locked into a permanent rictus.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 218-19)

In this rewritten extract, Royce is far more physically imposing, his features almost aggressive. But the cause for such a state is directly linked to his past trauma and isolation. This was done intentionally to elicit sympathy from the reader, and to emphasise a number of internal character elements that will be discussed in greater detail throughout the project.

Based loosely on the physically impressive and often stoically violent Parker, Farrow is a far more physically imposing character than Royce, his ability for violence directly linked to his past profession as a boxer. This violent physicality was clear from the very first consideration of the character, Farrow’s blue system card reading: ‘Boxer’s face. Long and powerful arms leading to hammer-like fists. Knuckles flat and swollen from years of fighting. His presence is cold, almost like a croc just floating beneath the water’.

In earlier drafts of the project, a number of these physical descriptions were employed to describe Farrow in his very first scene, but were slowly morphed over time to emphasise the effect of a life of violence—again, an attempt to elicit sympathy without denying the fundamental expectations of neon noir:

‘As Farrow tramped down the front steps of the house, he stretched his sore hands and popped his knuckles, the joints flat from years of fighting. Cool mornings like this always left him aching, the countless bruises and broken bones still lingering.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 202)

Despite this initial focus on damage inflicted, Farrow’s violent and imposing nature is displayed multiple times throughout the narrative: he is recognised as a capable boxer by those in town (*Coffin’s Reach, 257*), he is quick to defend his own home from a group of attackers (*Coffin’s Reach, 458*), and when he confronts Fitzie’s injured son Thomas towards the end of the narrative, the fellow worker is quick to identify his intimidating presence:

‘Someone spoke up from the doorway. Farrow looked over his shoulder to see Fitzie slumped up against the frame, towel held against his bleeding lip. ‘Just look at him, son. It’s not worth fighting it. Neither one of us would come out okay. Just tell him where they are.’”

(Coffin’s Reach, 474)

In this extract, the embittered Fitzie pleads for his son to give Farrow what he wants, as it would be impossible for either of them to confront him. This violent superiority is clear in Farrow’s physical presence, the sheer sight of him enough to drain the fight from two hardened millers. The reason for such a confrontation is understandable, however, as Farrow’s daughter has gone missing. And, although he is mistaken, all signs point to local mill involvement. Much like Royce before him, Farrow’s story was carefully crafted to provide sympathetic reasons for his violence—whether it be his near bankruptcy, threats from the mill, or the welfare of Nicole.

The character to change the most over the course of research and redrafting is undoubtedly Nicole. Upon revisiting her white system card, and the early notes that defined

her burgeoning characterisation, two major differences became clear: firstly, the earliest iteration of the character was far more passive and non-violent, and secondly, Nicole was originally a young boy named Jake.

This embryonic version of Nicole never sat comfortably with me, but I always struggled to elucidate the reasons why. After further research revealed that, unlike hard-boiled before it, neon noir crime fiction could feature non-male protagonists, I began to experiment with the character by rewriting him as a female. This process not only made the character more interesting in the wider context of the masculine setting, as it provided a different perspective and set of experiences to explore the narrative, but also revealed qualities that hitherto did not exist. Upon reflection this makes sense. Often a character will not be clear to a writer in the earliest stages of a project, and ‘[they] will discover as [they] write’ (Disher 2001, 45).

Through this rewriting process, a number of Nicole’s neon noir qualities began to supersede her former passiveness. For example, in the final draft of *Coffin’s Reach* it is clear that Nicole is capable of withstanding physical damage:

‘As the two of them approached the brush, Nicole smelt copper in the air, tasted it at the back of her throat. It reminded her of the time she split her gums. An older boy at school had roughly pushed her against a wall, pinning her there as he ran his hands along her back and legs, and blood had filled her mouth.’

(*Coffin’s Reach*, 357)

Furthermore, she herself is capable of physical violence, as evidenced by her memory of throwing a brick hard enough to ‘split the skin’ above the eyes of the same boy who beat her—the situation again written to elicit sympathy (*Coffin’s Reach*, 357). This violent capability, while not as overt as in Royce or Farrow, is clearly recognised by those around Nicole, and is elucidated in a vignette from Norm’s perspective:

‘Norm stood back up and pocketed the money. He heard the television playing next door, canned laughter blaring out through the empty street.

That poor girl, he thought. It was only time until she was just like her father, her face already wearing that same savage grimace, eyes cold and unflinching.

Norm threw his empty bottle into the front bush before heading back inside.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 341)

For a short time I contemplated making Nicole’s physical presence more traditionally intimidating, and her violent capabilities more overt, but it quickly became clear to me that such an approach would perhaps betray the realism expected of the neon noir evolution. Instead of a wayward young girl with a penchant for petty larceny, this extremity would colour her almost as a reimagining of her father in a child’s body. For such reasons I shied away from this approach and embraced her comparatively passive qualities—something that will be discussed in greater detail later in this sub-chapter.

Incorporeal

Beyond the physical qualities of the protagonist, it is important for a writer to contemplate the internal while planning and drafting. This is because characters ‘are active agents in fiction’, and their interior self, defined by ‘thoughts and feelings’, often motivates their movement through the narrative (Disher 2001, 49-50).

In neon noir, this character motivation, while often triggered by a crime, is ultimately a personal one, the evolution ‘as concerned with the protagonist’s journey and battle against the forces-that-be as with solving crime’ (Haut 1999, 5). This personalisation of the narrative is not limited to the evolution, however, and the roots of this trend can be traced all the way back to the earliest stories of hard-boiled.

hard-boiled

Despite the violence that has been discussed so far in this sub-chapter, the classic hard-boiled protagonist should not be considered a simple thug. In fact, the character archetype is quite the opposite. Behind the tough exterior of the classic hard-boiled private detective, there lies an emotionally damaged core that lends the character a strange dichotomy; while the ‘classical detective combined scientific ratiocination with poetic intuition, the hard-boiled detective’s character paradoxically mixes cynicism and honor, brutality and sentimentality, failure and success’ (Calweti 1976, 149). Such characterisation paints the hard-boiled protagonist as a ‘fundamentally divided figure’, the split revealing ‘a side to the private eye that is incompatible with the other’ (Scaggs 2007, 61). As Scaggs says in his book *Crime Fiction*:

‘He is tough, but sensitive. He is intelligent, but resorts to physical violence and coercion to achieve his goals. He is conspicuously hostile to the forces of law and order, but yet, nominally, at any rate, he shares their aim to restore and maintain the social order.’

(Scaggs 2007, 61)

The paradoxical nature of the hard-boiled protagonist is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. Here the tough-talking Marlowe almost perceives of himself as a knight, the author, as briefly mentioned earlier, ‘ironically identifying Marlowe with the heroes of romance narratives’ so as to emphasise his ‘romantic sensibility’ (Scaggs 2007, 61):

‘The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn’t have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the visor of his helmet back to be

sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying.'

(Chandler 2011, 1)

As instances of internal thought are rare in hard-boiled prose⁷, moments like this provide a glimpse into the interior world of Marlowe, and subsequently his motivation. By comparing the character with a noble knight, a figure who helps those in need, Chandler is delineating Marlowe's internal self. As genre theorist John Calweti once wrote: 'Since he becomes emotionally and morally committed to some of the persons involved, or because the crime poses some basic crisis in his image of himself, the hard-boiled detective remains unfulfilled until he has taken a personal moral stance toward the criminal' (Calweti 1976, 143).

This moral stance thus fuels the character's investigation, and invariably he will find 'that he must go beyond the solution to some kind of personal choice or action' (Calweti 1976, 142)—the latter often manifesting in a climactic physical confrontation or shoot-out. This deadly conclusion is almost antithetical to the typical apprehension of a criminal expected in the crime fiction form, but such is the pleasure of classic hard-boiled. As already discussed, the *Black Mask* inspired narrative gives readers an opportunity to identify 'with an invulnerable agent of male power and mastery' (Forster 2000, 11).

This internal morality, and the subsequent investigation it fuels, leads the traditional hard-boiled protagonist down a lonely path. Forced to work a 'murky space...between conventional society and a criminal underclass', the traditional hard-boiled protagonist ultimately feels a 'discomfort with traditional roles or bourgeois values of home, family, and friends' (Abbott 2002, 3). Furthermore, due to the character's strict moral code, he is forced to work outside the organised structures of law. As Mike Hammer so bluntly puts it:

⁷ For a greater discussion see Chapter Two – Part Five

‘By Christ, I’m not letting the killer go through the tedious process of the law. You know what happens, damn it. They get the best lawyer there is and screw up the whole thing and wind up a hero!...No, damn it. A jury is cold and impartial like they’re supposed to be, while some snotty lawyer makes them pour tears as he tells how his client was insane at the moment or had to shoot in self-defence. Swell. The law is fine. But this time I’m the law and I’m not going to be cold and impartial.’

(Spillane in Calweti 1976, 143)

This separation from organised structures and wider society is furthermore emphasised in the traditional occupation of the hard-boiled protagonist. As Scaggs notes in his book *Crime Fiction*:

‘The word ‘private’ is an indicator of the PI’s most obvious trait: his private nature. This private nature is further indicated in the first person ‘I’ of the term ‘PI’. The hard-boiled private eye is a private ‘I’, a loner, an alienated individual who exists outside or beyond the socio-economic order of family, friends, work, and home.’

(Scaggs 2007, 59)

Although the first person qualities of this ‘I’ point of view will not be discussed in this sub-chapter⁸, Scagg’s quote once again emphasises the loneliness of the hard-boiled protagonist—a result of his internal moral burden. And although this emotional separation from family, society, and the world at large continues into the neon noir evolution to some degree, the reasons behind such characterisation and its overall representation are far less romantic or noble.

⁸ For a greater discussion see Chapter Two – Part Two

neon noir

As already discussed within this sub-chapter, the internal motivation for a neon noir character is a personal one, albeit not always inherently moral. This is unsurprising when one considers the genesis text of the evolution. The character at the heart of Richard Stark's *The Hunter* is not 'unfulfilled until he has taken a personal moral stance toward the criminal' (Calweti 1976, 143); but instead he is the criminal. Working mostly as a professional thief, Parker marks his debut as a man driven by revenge, a ceaseless somnambulant who won't be stopped until he kills Mal Resnick—a fellow thief who robbed him and left him for dead:

“‘What are you going to do [about Resnick], Parker?’ she asked, and the quaver of fear had finally reached her voice.

“I'm going to drink his blood,” he said. “I'm going to chew up his heart and spit it into the gutter for the dogs to raise a leg at. I'm going to peel the skin off him and rip out his veins and hang him with them.” He sat in the chair, his fists clenching and unclenching, his eyes glaring at her.’

(Stark 2008, 16)

Due to this extreme characterisation, the author Donald Westlake originally killed Parker off at the conclusion of *The Hunter*, mostly because ‘that's what you were supposed to do’ with such a character (Block in Stark 2011, viii). If it wasn't for Pocket Books editor Bucklin Moon pressuring Westlake to change the ending so the novel could continue on as a series, perhaps neon noir as we know it today may have never existed, as Richard Stark's series of ‘brutal, existential...noir narratives’ are undoubtedly the starting point for the evolution (Haut 1999, 33).

Although the Parker narratives are overwhelmingly driven by the personal desires of the protagonist—whether it be revenge, or refilling his cash stash—Parker's actions paint him almost as an anarchistic hero to some readers. In *The Hunter*, after finally enacting revenge

on Resnick, Parker goes after the man's employer, a local organised criminal outfit, to retrieve his stolen cash. Through this confrontation against man and organisation, 'Stark portrays the Mafia as the quintessential corporation, and Parker, in pursuit of corporate criminals, as a havoc-causing urban terrorist' (Haut 1999, 33-4). In this way, the novel becomes focused not only on the protagonist's personal journey, but also their 'battle against the forces-that-be' (Haut 1999, 5)—a reoccurring element of neon noir.

Obviously, with such extremes there must be consequences, lest the author risk romanticising the protagonist—particularly in regards to how other characters in the world react to him—and therefore losing the realism associated with neon noir (Haut 1999, 4). Subsequently, Parker is overwhelmingly an isolated character. The dangerous nature of his work means that he rarely lives as his own identity, spending most of his days 'under the name Charles Willis'; he is also unable to keep a fixed address, and subsequently moves between 'coastal resort center[s]' when not working (Stark 2009, 52). Because of this transient life, Parker rarely communicates with anyone beyond the occasional woman he is sleeping with, but it is clear that such relationships are fleeting:

'Parker spent two weeks on the white sand beach at Biloxi and on a white sandy bitch named Belle, but he was restless, and one day without thinking about it he checked out...and moved on to New Orleans. He took a room in a downtown motel and connected with a girl folk singer the first night, but all she did was complain how her manager was lousing up her career, so three days later he ditched her and took up with a Bourbon Street stripper instead.'

(Stark 2009, 7)

The isolated nature of a protagonist like Parker has clear parallels with the classic hard-boiled tradition. But as neon noir ostensibly exudes an 'obsession with verisimilitude' (Haut 1999, 2), it would be unreasonable for a reader to expect this isolation to remain over the course of

the twenty four novels featuring Parker—lest the character appear romanticised in his ‘self-gratifying toughness’ (Knight 1997, 51). Perhaps for this reason, Stark eventually led Parker into a seemingly monogamous relationship with a woman named Claire, although the nature of their relationship is hardly described in an affectionate manner:

‘Now she wanted to know none of the details of the ventures he went on, not even where he was going or how long he expected to be gone. When he was around they lived together—in resort hotels, mostly, up till now—and when he was gone she waited for him.’

(Stark 2010, 58)

Parker is not the only isolated neon noir protagonist to eventually develop a long-term romantic liaison. In the Matthew Scudder series by Lawrence Sanders, the alcoholic ex-cop develops a long-term relationship with a prostitute named Elaine, and he even allows her ‘to occasionally assist him in his investigations’ (Haut 1999, 82). This is despite Scudder himself not being a traditional gumshoe. As the character himself says: ‘Private detectives are licensed. They tap telephones and follow people. They fill out forms, they keep records, all of that. I don’t do those things. Sometimes I do favours for people. They give me gifts’ (Sanders 2001, 4).

These investigations, although not traditionally sanctioned, still contain the personal motivation expected of the evolution; the details of the case may take ‘the investigator away from his or her normal life, but rarely from his or her private thoughts’ (Haut 1999, 79). After accidentally killing a young girl on duty as a police officer, Scudder ‘seeks redemption’ through his work, ‘and, although not a Catholic, [he] lights candles in various churches, before placing a percentage of his earnings in coffers’ (Haut 1999, 80). And again, like with the Parker novels, this personal motivation leads Scudder to confront the *forces-that-be* during his

investigations—whether it be organised religion in *The Sins of the Fathers* or the culture of crime in *The Devil Knows Your Dead* (1993).

australia

This personal motivation continues into a number of prominent Australian novels with neon noir influences. In *Bad Debts*, the first Jack Irish novel by Peter Temple, the lawyer-cum-investigator is drawn back into his shadowy past when a former client is shot dead by a police officer in a pub car park. Receiving no monetary remittance for his services, Irish's investigation is purely personal:

‘Danny McKillop had been shot dead outside the pub where he was hoping I would come to meet him. I couldn't just leave the matter there. I know I *should* leave it there, but I couldn't. At the worst time in his life, Danny had needed a sober lawyer. He had got me. Years later, he had turned to me again. And I didn't show up.’

(Temple 2012a, 35)

In true neon noir fashion, this investigation is not only a personal journey, but also one that leads Irish to confront the *forces-that-be*. The character's investigation reveals an under-age sex ring involving ‘a Cabinet Minister, public servants, a clergyman, trade union leaders and others’; a police sanctioned murder of a ‘social justice activist’; and ‘massive corruption surrounding Charis Corporation's six hundred million dollar Yarra Cove development’ (Temple 2012a, 302).

The idea of a single investigator tackling wider institutional corruption is a regular theme throughout not only the Irish novels, but all of Temple's work, with a number of his novels dealing with the ‘intermingling of big crime and big government, and the threatening international capital that funds and flow from both’ (Knight 2011, 74). Furthermore, it seems

to be a common thread in a number of Australian crime novels featuring characters with dark pasts, such as Andrew McGahan's *Last Drinks* (2001), P.M. Newton's *The Old School* (2011), and Garry Disher's *Bitter Wash Road* (2013).

Irish's investigation is not a lonely one, however, as Jack himself is never truly alone. In regards to *Bad Debts*, the 'structure of the plot and the city is...insistently interactive' (Knight 2011, 73), and subsequently Irish's investigation is bolstered by his relationship with a journalist named Linda, and his friendly interactions with the 'Royboys'—a group of old Fitzroy Football Club supporters.

A more traditionally isolated protagonist can be found, however, in David Whish-Wilson's Swann series—particularly the first novel *Line of Sight*. After having an affair 'with a younger colleague', Swann's family life is uprooted, the protagonist 'living in a hotel for a month' after the separation (Whish-Wilson 2010, 9); furthermore, Swann is ostracised by his work colleagues after speaking out against 'the so-called purple circle of corrupt police, who profited from organised crime in the state' (Whish-Wilson 2010, 4).

This isolation does admittedly fade somewhat with the sequel novel *Zero to the Bone*. After the events of *Line of Sight*, Swann has reunited with his estranged family, and is now undertaking an investigation into the suspicious death of a geologist with the help of the deceased man's wife. From a professional perspective, however, Swann is now working as a private investigator, and this position only reinforces his separation from the police, his work done almost in secrecy:

'Swann tore out the page of newsprint and crunched it into a ball. His daughters wouldn't have seen the article. The years since his forced retirement had been quiet, all about keeping his head down and looking after his family. He'd made a pact with Marion that he wouldn't drink at home, tried to make their lives feel better.'

(Whish-Wilson 2013, 15)

Regardless of this gradual shift away from isolation, the investigation within each text is undertaken primarily for personal concerns. In *Line of Sight*, Swann's investigation is driven by the murder of his friend, the disappearance of his own daughter, and the 'word on the streets...that he was a marked man' (Whish-Wilson 2010, 4). Similarly, the story unfolds in *Zero to the Bone* only because of Swann's personal history with corruption:

"I'd like to help you, Mrs Henderson, but I'm paid by the hour. There may not be an answer to your husband's suicide. Or not an answer you'd like to hear."

She laughed ironically. Eyes wide. "There *is* an answer, Mr Frank Swann. Ex-superintendent of uniformed police. Ex-detective sergeant. I followed your progress through the Royal Commission. I know who you are, and how you resigned in..."

Disgrace. He waited for her to say it.

"...disgust. It's why I came to you. To find the answer. You put the murder of a brothel keeper ahead of your own career, the trust of your colleagues. Was she murdered by a policeman?"...

He leant forward, elbows on his knees. "No promises."

(Whish-Wilson 2013, 21)

It would seem as if local Australian crime writers are quick to produce personalised crime narratives that tackle corruption on a large scale, which is no surprise when one considers the long and sordid history of the nation itself; but there remains a hesitation to truly isolate some of these protagonists in a neon noir sense—perhaps because the larrikin figure is often associated with a joker cracking up his mates over a beer or two, rather than the introspective isolated type (Bellanta 2012, xii).

coffin's reach

The three primary characters of *Coffin's Reach* were written to be isolated in a number of different ways: the town itself is geographically separate from larger cities such as Warwick and Brisbane, enclosed by 'surrounding foothills' (*Coffin's Reach*, 233); and each character is facing personal circumstances that leave them struggling to engage with others socially, whether it be an investigation, a stop-work, or a troubled life.

Despite such isolation, each character still experiences flickers of personal connection with various secondary characters throughout their respective narratives; Royce has Eddie and his family, Farrow has his daughter, and Nicole has Bishop and Mariah. These connections, however, are somewhat tenuous or even fleeting. Royce's narrative ends with him lying to his wife about his work, which their relationship 'can't survive' (*Coffin's Reach*, 506). Farrow struggles to communicate with his daughter, the character often discovering that the 'words just weren't there' (*Coffin's Reach*, 249). And, after splintering her relationship with Mariah over a simple misunderstanding, Nicole goes on to lose her only friend—the latter relationship already 'strange...something unsaid...between them' (*Coffin's Reach*, 457).

A few carefully selected narrative choices only emphasise this character isolation. Although Royce works for an organised police force, his dark history means he is segregated from the associated culture, and, after Tyzinski tells him 'don't trust anyone', Royce is forced to work without police backing or guidance from Eddie (*Coffin's Reach*, 327). Furthermore, Royce is new to the Well and the locals see him as an outsider:

'Royce rapped his knuckles on the bar and the publican looked up at him.

'Must be the new fella then,' he said.

'How'd you know?' Royce asked.

The publican laughed. 'Mate, take a look around.'

(*Coffin's Reach*, 272)

In contrast to Royce, Farrow has spent most of his life in the Well, and this is obvious in his indelible legacy on the town: his photograph hangs on the wall of the local pub, ‘his gloves raised high, face smooth and youthful’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 226); and the locals try to talk to him about his glory days as a fighter (*Coffin’s Reach*, 257). Farrow wants no part of the latter though: ‘Small talk made others comfortable, but not Farrow’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 223).

This aversion to social interaction is illustrative of Farrow’s wider characterisation. He is a hard and blunt man, who does not mince his words or actions, and subsequently he is isolated—all despite being surrounded by people:

‘An older-guy in overalls peeled away from the group and approached Farrow by the road’s edge. He offered him a drink from his beat-up flask. ‘Been a good while,’ the guy said.

Farrow knew the man’s freckled face, but couldn’t recall a name. That’s how it was for most of the millers. Farrow was happy to work side-by-side with them, but he rarely crossed their paths in town, nor would he sit with them at the pub. Mostly they couldn’t handle his quiet nature, and they would often squirm with discomfort as he sat for long moments in perfect stillness.

‘What do you reckon about today?’ Farrow said.’

(*Coffin’s Reach*, 257)

Furthermore, the unfolding situation at the mill only compounds Farrow’s isolation from the town’s population, the striking workers reacting negatively to his decision to pike. Pete makes this clear later in the story when talking about the local pub, which is frequented by a large portion of the Well locals: ‘Last time I went to the pub, I wasn’t exactly welcomed with open arms’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 343). Furthermore, Farrow himself experiences local aggression later in the narrative when he visits the same locale:

‘With the sweating beer in hand, Farrow made his way over towards the pool tables. The laughter around him slowly petered out, the sound replaced with a

hiss of whispers. As he passed a table a hand grabbed his forearm, Fitzie's gnarled fingers wrapped so tightly they dug into the skin. 'Fucking courage showing your face around here, mate,' he said.'

(Coffin's Reach, 441)

Much like her father, Nicole is socially isolated despite encountering other people at both home and at school. As already discussed, her history with her father is problematic. And on top of this, the local children treat her horribly:

'This morning Mariah had dropped her off at school, and she had promised the woman she would stay until the end of day. But during class the older boys behind her started to whisper and laugh and throw notes. One of them said: *nice tits love*. She had left not long after, as soon as the first lunch bell rang.'

(Coffin's Reach, 405)

Such experiences are common for Nicole, and the result is isolating on a social level; the character even ruminates on this, saying she 'always felt like she was on the outside of the other students, looking in on them' (*Coffin's Reach, 270*). Admittedly, in contrast to these experiences, Nicole does develop close relationships with both Mariah and Bishop, but neither truly eases the young girl's sense of isolation:

'Something began to drip down her face and at first she thought she may have cut her cheek. But in the mirror she could see she was crying. What would her father say? Mariah? Bishop? Even though all three showed her attention, she still had her doubts they would understand why she came to places like this, why she was the way she was.'

(Coffin's Reach, 372)

Regardless, in earlier drafts I attempted to limit Nicole's interactions with these characters, nearly exorcising them completely. But by doing so I was decreasing her personal drive in the narrative, as these relationships provide momentum and direction to her story. Therefore the relationships were maintained. Much like with her violent capabilities, this approach means Nicole is perhaps not entirely a traditional neon noir character, but something else linked to the localised form. In many ways she exhibits the path of experience required for a neon noir emergence, and offers a specific example of how characters such as these came to be within the distinct local setting—something that is arguably necessary when establishing the broad strokes of Australian neon noir. Furthermore she provides a contrast to characters such as Farrow and Royce, emphasising their extremity through comparison.

Finally, the state of isolation each protagonist endures was intentionally linked to his or her personal motivation; through this approach, I wanted to elucidate the personal cost of crime and corruption, and garner additional sympathy from the reader to dampen the impact of the character's often shocking actions. For example, Royce pushes himself to solve Rose's disappearance, damaging his family life in the process, only so he can know a 'wrong had been struck from the growing tally' (*Coffin's Reach*, 243). Farrow is concerned primarily with earning money to 'keep the bank at bay' and win back his family (*Coffins Reach*, 223), and is willing to damage anything or anyone—no matter how long they have been acquainted—to achieve this. And Nicole, as already alluded to, is looking for something to fill the hole left by the breakdown of her family life, her mother's departure leaving her angry and violent—the experience taking 'something from the girl. Something [her father] didn't fully understand' (*Coffin's Reach*, 249).

The isolating experience of each character, although crafted to be inherently personal and sympathetic, intertwines to reveal a discursive perspective on a much wider conspiracy of

corruption that will impact the town, the state, and the country⁹. In this way, each character ultimately confronts ‘the forces-that-be’, albeit for both better and worse as evidenced by the closing chapters (Haut 1999, 5).

Findings

Australian authors rarely embrace the extremity of neon noir characterisation. A protagonist such as David Whish-Wilson’s Frank Swann, while appearing in narratives that offer a number of familiar elements to the avid neon noir reader, is friendly to the locals and appreciated in return—therefore removing the violent physicality and isolation typically expected of the evolution. This softening of neon noir protagonists even continues into Australian texts directly inspired by the evolution. For example, Garry Disher’s Wyatt is notably far less violent and cold than his North American inspiration Parker; Disher instead ‘pursuing the vein of...sympathy for criminals in the Australian tradition’ (Knight 1997, 55).

It is perhaps this lineage of sympathy that leads Australian crime writers to shy away from fully embracing neon noir characterisation. From what has been discussed throughout this sub-chapter, it is easy to conceive that local authors may be hesitant to make their characters, even those who are morally questionable, too violent, physically imposing, or isolated, lest they lose the romantic lineage of the capable bushman that first inspired colonial fiction—a figure that can still be found in the enduring legacy of the larrikin. This distinctly Australian identity, whether real or imagined, cannot be wholly ignored when localising neon noir, however, as the evolution prides itself on realism. Such a figure is also undoubtedly intrinsic to the cultural fabric of Australia. So these distinctly laconic and ironical figures must appear, even in a narrative driven by comparatively violent and isolated protagonists.

⁹ For a greater discussion see Chapter Two—Part Three.

To address this, I surrounded my protagonists with a number of secondary characters that were written to fulfil the expectations of the traditional larrikin, and this can be seen most notably in Royce's Station Sergeant Eddie Knowles. In this way, such an undeniably Australian figure can still feature within the landscape of the novel, tinging the localisation with an aura of realism, without having to sacrifice the expected neon noir attributes of the protagonist.

Furthermore, the three primary characters—Royce, Farrow, and Nicole—were written to achieve a balance between expectations of the sub-genre, and the expectations of the reader. Characters may be violent, but only against those who seemingly deserve such damage. They are isolated and thus often cold to other characters, but the circumstances surrounding this isolation were crafted to elicit sympathy from a reader, and display the effects of crime and corruption on the individual. Such an approach allows me to imbue each character with the expected traits of neon noir, but without alienating an audience familiar with, and oftentimes expectant of, the likeable larrikin archetype.

Part Two **Point of View**

Within my body of creative work, I have traditionally employed a first-person point of view to tell my stories, as this voice comes most naturally to me—perhaps because my earliest fiction had a semi-autobiographical element. While such an approach is certainly feasible when developing a single protagonist creative work, I began to experience concerns about point of view when I realised *Coffin's Reach* would require multiple perspectives to fully express the complex narrative. This led me to a number of questions: can a first-person voice be used on numerous protagonists, or would this prove confusing to the reader? Should only one character feature first-person, while the others feature third?

To answer such questions, I referred to notable neon noir texts in an effort to discern whether there was a consistent approach to point of view. It quickly became evident, however, that both first-person and third-person were used within neon noir crime fiction, and each approach had its own distinct advantages and disadvantages—both from a craft perspective, and in regards to emphasising specific themes of the sub-genre.

First-Person

Despite not being the predominant approach within the evolution, there are a number of neon noir novels that use a first-person point of view to tell their story, for example the Matthew Scudder novels by Lawrence Sanders, or the Lew Griffin novels by James Sallis. Typically these first-person neon noirs are concerned with private investigator narratives, and employ the 'time-honoured structure' of the *Black Mask* era writers, who similarly wrote in first-person (Haut 1999, 72). Therefore, when exploring first-person in neon noir, it is integral to return to the classic hard-boiled model from which the evolution originated.

hard-boiled

When a narrative employs a first-person point of view, the ‘narrator is actually a character in the story, either the main character or a relatively minor character observing the actions of others’ (Disher 2001, 85). Arguably, this approach allows ‘readers intimate access to the doubts, hopes, fears and machinations of the narrator’ (Disher 2001, 87), which in turn gives the reader ‘the illusion of receiving the story directly’ (Kuiper 2011, 10).

One could assume then that this opportunity for intimacy was the reason for *Black Mask* era hard-boiled writers to adopt first-person as their primary point of view. Classic hard-boiled texts veer away from the expected intimate internal voice, however, limiting the first-person description to mostly actions:

‘The telephone hook rattled. Her steps sounded down the hallway—rapid steps.

I set fire to a cigarette and stared at it until I heard her going down the steps. Then I went to a window, lifted an edge of the blind, and looked out at Laurel Avenue, and at the square white garage that stood in the rear of the house on that side.

Presently a slender woman in dark coat and hat came into sight hurrying from house to garage. It was Mrs. Wilson. She drove away in a Buick coupé. I went back to my chair and waited.

Three-quarters of an hour went by. At five minutes after eleven, automobile brakes screeched outside. Two minutes later Mrs. Wilson came into the room. She had taken off hat and coat. Her face was white, her eyes almost black.’

(Hammett 2003, 3)

Despite being from the point of view of the Continental Op, this excerpt from *Red Harvest* contains very little introspection or internal thought. In this way, the Op is presented as a ‘direct, neutral observer’ and offers ‘minimal interpretation and analysis for the reader’ (Scaggs 2007, 60). This approach is not limited to Hammett’s work, and can also be seen in Chandler’s Marlowe novels:

‘Rain filled the gutters and splashed knee-high off the sidewalk. Big cops in slickers that shone like gun barrels had a lot of fun carrying giggling girls across the bad places. The rain drummed hard on the roof of the car and the burbank top began to leak. A pool of water formed on the floorboards for me to keep my feet in. It was too early in the fall for that kind of rain. I struggled into a trench coat and made a dash for the nearest drugstore and bought myself a pint of whiskey. Back in the car I used enough of it to keep warm and interested. I was long overparked, but the cops were too busy carrying girls and blowing whistles to bother about that.’

(Chandler 2011, 32)

If hard-boiled writers are, for the most part, not incorporating the traditional expectations of the first person point of view—‘thoughts, emotions, attitudes’ etc. (Disher 2001, 89)—why do they employ such an approach? As there are very few surveys of the early *Black Mask* era hard-boiled writers, it is difficult to say explicitly why this first-person point of view was so quickly embraced. Through retrospective analysis, however, a few general assumptions can be made.

Firstly, this point of view, despite lacking moments of overt thought or reflection, leaves readers ‘just as much in the dark as the hero they have come to know, like, and trust’ (Disher 2001, 95). This is due to the limitations of the employed point of view. With first-person the reader ‘can only go as far into the story as the narrator goes and can witness only schemes that the narrator witnesses’ (Disher 2001, 9). In the context of hard-boiled crime writing, the lack of an internal voice arguably allows a space for the reader to step into the shoes of the character—the crime solved, or sometimes undertaken, in tandem. Such an approach was undoubtedly appealing to the working class readers of the early pulp magazines, as they were typically seeking ‘action, adventure, and escape’ from their daily life (Smith 2000, 35).

Secondly, as already discussed in the previous sub-chapter, this first-person ‘I’ point of view thematically embodies the ‘persistent personalisation’ of the early hard-boiled form, and the protagonist’s isolated, observant, and often independent characterisation; as Knight says in his book *Crime Fiction 1800-2000*: the hard-boiled protagonist ‘operates alone, judges others by himself, shares no one’s values and mores’ (Knight 2004, 112). This independence was undoubtedly appealing to pulp fiction readers who were searching for autonomy in their own everyday lives and work, specifically in the ‘face of an entrapping society’ dominated by factories and production lines (Smith 2000, 39).

The observant nature of this point of view is furthermore emphasised in the appropriated title of many hard-boiled protagonists: not private investigator, not P.I., but private *eye*. The term brings to mind the staring eye logo of the real-world Pinkerton detective agency, which Hammett once worked for, and is furthermore ‘primarily suggestive of covert surveillance’ (Scaggs 2007, 60).

Noting this predominance is not to say that all early hard-boiled crime writing employed a first-person point of view, as a number of books by Hammett shied away from this approach, including, *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) and *The Glass Key* (1931). Nor should it indicate that all hard-boiled lacked an internal voice of some description; in fact, a number of prominent writers in the sub-genre employed prose modulation to indicate internal shifts within their protagonists¹⁰. Overwhelmingly, however, the hard-boiled point of view is an observant, action focused first-person.

neon noir

As already briefly discussed, the neon noir private investigator narrative is heavily indebted to the ‘traditional model’ of hard-boiled—albeit one where the protagonist ‘no longer had to

¹⁰ For a greater discussion see Chapter Two – Part Five.

possess a witty response to every situation, nor be self-righteous or excessively moral' (Haut 1999, 63). Due to this clear lineage, many texts continue the neutral first-person point of view established in the classic *Black Mask* era, such as Lawrence Sanders's *The Sins of the Fathers*:

'When I got back to my hotel there was a phone message at the desk. Cale Hanniford had called at a quarter after eleven. I was to call him. He had left a number, and it was one he had already given me. His office number.

I called him from my room. He was at lunch. His secretary said he would call me back. I said no, I'd try him again in an hour so.'

(Block 2001, 123)

A hard-boiled inspired first-person point of view continues into a number of prominent neo noir works, particularly those concerned with history. By adopting familiar hard-boiled craft approaches, it could be argued that these select writers are articulating cultural crime 'while recollecting specific sites and situations'—almost like 'figures in the historical mirror' (Haut 1999, 72). This can be seen most clearly in James Ellroy's historical crime novel *The Black Dahlia* where he 'conspires to emphasise the appropriation of history...both factual and literary' through his work (Scaggs 2007, 129):

'We dropped Maynard off at the Hall of Justice jail, and Lee phoned Fritz Vogel at Central squadroom, telling him the rape-o was in custody and ready to be interrogated on the Bunker Hill burglaries. Then it was back to City Hall, a call to notify Highland Park dicks of Maynard's arrest and a call to Hollywood Juvie to ease my conscience on the kid. The matron I talked to told me that Billy Maynard was there, waiting for his mother, Coleman Maynard's ex-wife, a car hop with six hooking convictions. He was still bawling for his daddy, and I hung up wishing I hadn't called.'

(Ellroy 2006, 52-3)

Beyond the title of the novel paying tribute to the Chandler scripted film-noir classic *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), this limited first-person point of view employed by Ellroy positions the novel as a ‘pastiche of Chandler’s hard-boiled style’ (Scaggs 2007, 130). By embracing the traditional first-person point of view, Ellroy has arguably created a work that suggests ‘both a continuity with, and a development of, hard-boiled fiction’, all within the framework of a historically inspired procedural (Scaggs 2007, 130).

australia

Australian texts influenced by the classic *Black Mask* style often employ a first-person point of view. For example, in Peter Corris’ *The Dying Trade* and its subsequent sequels, a traditionally observant hard-boiled first-person is used:

‘I drove across to The Rocks and bought a paper from a barefoot kid in the public bar of the Eight Bells. The pub is tucked away in the crevice of the sandstone and claims to be directly descended from the first inn built by the waterside...The counter tea, served early, was steak, salad and chips and I ordered it along with a litre carafe of the house plonk.’

(Corris 2012, 39)

Working in tandem with other elements discussed throughout the body of this project, Corris’ extrospective first-person embodies the point of view established by *Black Mask* era writers—particularly Ross Macdonald’s ‘mildly psychiatric quests through Southern California’ (Knight 1997, 136). This embodiment can be linked directly to Corris’ aforementioned ability to ‘combine the broad structures of the mainstream American private eye’ (Knight 1997, 136).

This first person point of view continues into more recent Australian crime narratives inspired by Corris, including the Jack Irish novels by Peter Temple:

‘I was standing on the leaking porch of a weatherboard house in Richmond. I’d got the address from a prison officer I knew from the days when I visited clients in Pentridge. The prison records had Mrs Mary McKillop, aunt, as Danny McKillop’s next of kin. I looked her up in the phone book: it was the number Danny had left on the machine.’

(Temple 2012a, 43)

Again, much like Hardy before him, Temple’s use of a first-person point of view in the Jack Irish novels is unsurprising, as the series follows the broad strokes of its distant North American influence. As genre theorist Stephen Knight says, the novels follow ‘familiar patterns of crime fiction with a detective, a case, and a city’ (Knight 2011, 73). Interestingly, these patterns can be found in a number of Australian crime novels that employ a first-person perspective—for example, *City of Light* by Dave Warner (1995), and *The Midnight Promise: A detective’s story in ten cases* by Zane Lovitt.

Even when employed locally, this first person-point of view still echoes the ‘persistent personalisation’ of the early hard-boiled crime fiction form (Knight 2004, 112). Unlike the North American iteration, however, it is less related to a readership searching for autonomy of work, and more directly indebted to authors capturing a very specific figure in Australian culture, and one very familiar to Corris himself: ‘the ironic, laconic and intuitively capable bushman’ (Knight 1997, 136).

Since the release of *The Dying Trade*, Corris has revealed that the Hardy character was influenced by his uncles, ‘men who came back from the war with the reserved toughness that later generations have called being laid-back’ (Knight 1997, 136), a trait that continues into the modern larrikin. Thus the ‘I’ in this case perhaps represents a self-sufficient capability or independence—whether it be at work or at home—rather than the isolation and observation of the traditional hard-boiled model. This is because such characters are arguably

‘opposed to the individual’, due in part to their preoccupation with ‘mateship’ (Turner 1986, 87), and therefore often rely on connections to friends and family.

For example, Peter Temple’s Jack Irish novels, which can be read as semi-successors to Corris’ Hardy novels, continue this self-sufficient, yet sociable ‘I’ voice. After kicking the drink and spending weeks at home ‘going out only to buy food’ (Temple 2012a, 34), Irish is able to start working again, and make ends meet as a solo debt collector. This job, while undertaken alone and self-sufficiently, does not mean Irish himself is isolated; instead his world, as already discussed in the previous sub-chapter, is filled with numerous relationships. In fact, Irish only overcomes his wife’s death with the help of Andrew Greer—Irish’s ‘former law partner and friend since law school’ (Temple 2014, 47)—and often relies on his council throughout the series.

coffin’s reach

In the earliest writing stages of *Coffin’s Reach*, I intentionally experimented with various points of view, oftentimes within the same draft. This process of experimentation led to an early version of the novel that featured both first and third-person, the shift employed to emphasise the difference between characters; for example, first-person would be used for Royce, while third would be employed for both members of the Farrow family.

My reasons for this stylistic choice were numerous. Firstly, Royce was the earliest character to be conceived, and therefore my earliest scenes were written in first-person—my default point of view when writing. Secondly, I believed at the time that a disparity in points of view would emphasise, from a craft perspective, Royce’s outsider status within the town; the observant isolation of a first-person point of view could act as an artifice for such characterisation. And finally, first-person would allow an entryway for the reader into the historical rural Queensland setting, the point of view giving them ‘intimate access to the

doubts, hopes, fears and machinations of the narrator' as he traverses the dangers of the town for the first time (Disher 2001, 87).

As briefly touched upon in the last chapter, the earliest physical representations of Royce positioned him almost as a noble knight errant, like Chandler's Marlowe before him, rather than an archetypal neon noir anti-hero. Such characterisation was only further emphasised with a first-person point of view, as oftentimes I would use it to justify Royce's questionable actions:

'The fresh-faced guy tries to head-butt me. I hit him hard in the stomach and he drops to his knees, dry-heaving. I give him a quick cheap shot in the kidneys, dropping him to the ground. The blow is unnecessary, but what other choice did I have? With the crowd pushing in around us, I couldn't risk him getting up again.'

(*Coffin's Reach*, early draft)

As the writing process continued, however, it quickly became evident to me that a first person point of view was unsuitable for the project for a number of reasons. Firstly, such an overtly introspective point of view was far too personal for the evolution, essentially contradicting select elements of neon noir characterisation—an idea that will be discussed further in this sub-chapter.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, I believe the constant switch between first-person for Royce and third-person for the Farrow family was distracting, as this switch would occur multiple times in a single chapter, sometimes only a page apart. In contrast, most neon noir novels with multi-perspective narratives, for example Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential*, are in a consistent third. This approach ostensibly avoids drawing attention to the clear construction of the novel, and thus helps the work to maintain the 'lack of [clear] artifice' that often characterises the evolution (Haut 1999, 2).

Despite eventually removing this first-person point of view for Royce, the process of experimentation was integral to my understanding of the character, and the novel as a whole. Upon consideration I realised that this process of exploring a first-person point of view was a tool for unblocking my understanding of the character. As Disher himself says:

‘Although fiction writers often try a different point of view at the drafting stage if the original proves unsuitable or if they’re ‘blocked’, most tend not to combine a range of viewpoints in a story or novel.’

(Disher 2001, 97)

By revealing the ‘doubts, hopes, fears and machinations of the narrator’ (Disher 2001, 87), I was not only justifying the character’s actions for the reader, but I was also discovering the moral boundaries, motivations, and nature of Royce. This discovery was integral to my eventual refining of the character, and his slow shift towards something far more complex and appropriate for a localised version of neon noir.

Third-Person

In contrast to first-person’s innate ability to enter the mind of the storyteller, a third-person point of view traditionally gives the reader a sense that the story is being ‘told *about* a character or set of characters rather than *by* a character’ (Disher 2001, 78). A third-person point of view can furthermore be tweaked in three very distinct ways: an author can employ limited third person, where we don’t stray from the character’s viewpoint; omniscient third-person, where the narrator is not locked to a single protagonist, and is aware of everything, both in past and future; and objective third-person, where the reader is given no insight into a character’s thoughts at all.

After realising my dichotomous approach to points of view was not going to work in the context of the wider project, I decided to conduct further research on a number of multi-

protagonist neon noir texts. Overwhelmingly, in neon noir narratives with multiple protagonists, a limited third person voice is employed throughout. The featured character typically alternates from chapter to chapter, almost like shifting through the disparate feeds of ‘future surveillance systems’ (Haut 1999, 34), and this allows the author to elucidate the expanse of a culture riddled with crime¹¹.

Furthermore, when compared to the first-person employed by early hard-boiled writers, this approach forces the reader to acknowledge the disparity between ‘the viewer and the viewed’, essentially prefiguring the ‘TV images of the war and future surveillance systems’ that underpin the disorder, paranoia, and fear often found at the heart of a neon noir narrative (Haut 1999, 34). This creates a ‘vicarious and voyeuristic’ experience for the reader, as the third-person disparity creates a ‘quasi-anthropological’ tone that echoes non-fiction writing or journalism, essentially blurring the line between fiction and reality (Haut 1999, 3).

neon noir

Despite the strong lineage of the first-person point of view in the earliest hard-boiled narratives, the genesis text of neon noir, *The Hunter* by Richard Stark, eschews this approach immediately, instead embracing a third-person that allows the reader to view the protagonist Parker ‘as through the lens of a camera’ (Haut 1999, 34):

‘Parker moved along the fence back to Glenwood Road, leaving the suitcase behind. The Luger was in his right hand, the target pistol in his left. He kept his hands close to his body as he moved. When he got to Glenwood Road, he stepped out onto the sidewalk and started to whistle.

He walked along, still whistling, and turned at the corner and walked down the block toward the car. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror, but he wasn’t carrying a suitcase, and he was whistling.

¹¹ For a greater discussion see Chapter Two—Part Three.

The car window was open. When Parker reached it, he turned and set both gun barrels on the sill, pointing at the driver, and murmured, “One word.”

(Stark 2008, 182)

This third person point of view is maintained throughout the novel, even when focusing on characters other than Parker. As is discussed in greater detail during Part Three, approximately halfway through *The Hunter* the novel shifts focus from Parker to a man named Mal Resnick: the criminal who double-crossed him on an earlier heist. A shifting perspective is a staple of the Parker series and arguably reached its zenith with *Butcher’s Moon*, an epic neon noir crime saga that shifts between countless characters including heisters, mob tough guys, security guards, casino owners, and Parker himself.

Although each character is viewed from an external point of view, some tonal idiosyncrasies occur between shifts to differentiate the perspective:

‘Frankie Faran had indigestion. He figured it was probably that Chinese food at Mr. Lozini’s house last night; not that there was anything wrong with Mr. Lozini’s cooking, but just that Chinese food never did seem to sit right in Frankie Faran’s stomach. But of course when you were invited to Mr. Lozini’s house for dinner, you couldn’t show up and then not eat, no matter *what* kind of food Mr. Lozini was cooking that night.

But boy, he paid for it all day today. Living on nothing but Alka-Seltzer and bread until he came down to the club around eight-thirty in the evening, when he had two bowls of soup du jour, which happened to be onion tonight. Onion soup was supposed to be good for the digestion.’

(Stark 2011, 32)

This excerpt, focusing on a low-level Mob enforcer named Frankie Faran, is written with an almost informal tone. Colloquial asides appear throughout, almost like flickers of thought; for example, ‘not that there was anything wrong with Mr. Lozini’s cooking’ and then ‘But boy,

he paid for it all day long'. Further down the page, beyond the quote above, there are even slang phrases like 'shtupping' as a nomenclature for sexual intercourse. Furthermore, the subject matter continues this casual tone; the reader is learning about the character and his flaws almost as if he is a stranger in a public place, casually complaining about his day. In stark contrast, consider this excerpt from the same novel, but from Parker's perspective:

'The only light in the room was the table lamp at Parker's elbow. Off to his right the Venetian blinds chattered occasionally in a slight breeze; they were angled upward, to let in air and to show the night-black sky with its thin nail-paring of moon and to block out the street-lit empty expanse of London Avenue.... Parker counted slowly, separating and smoothing the bills with blunt fingers, organizing them into two equal stacks. His face was expressionless, as though his mind were working on other thoughts behind the mechanical process of counting.'

(Stark 2011, 46)

In comparison to the Frankie Faran excerpt, this scene with Parker is startlingly emotionless; there is no internal thought of Parker, nor is there prose with a colloquial voice. Instead, the description is cold and clinical, almost like Parker himself. Yet, even with such differences, the point of view still remains a consistent third-person. These subtle differences between characters are undoubtedly related to Stark's prose, and would ideally be placed in the relevant sub-chapter later in the project. Due to how closely linked these subtle differentiations are to point of view, however, it is necessary to discuss them here.

These prose inflections continue beyond Stark's oeuvre, into the work of other neon noir novels, perhaps most notably James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential*. The novel, like *Butcher's Moon* before it, is locked to a number of different perspectives, each featuring distinct character-based inflections:

‘Ohrbach’s was packed—shoppers swarmed counters and garment racks. Bud elbowed up to floor 3, prime shoplifter turf: jewellery, decanter liquor.

Countertops strewn with watches; cash register lines thirty deep. Bud trawled for blond males, got sideswiped by housewives and kids. Then—a flashview—a blond buy in a suede loafer ducking into the men’s room.’

(Ellroy 1997, 11)

And then later, from another character’s perspective:

‘Shut into a room eight feet square. No windows, no telephone, no intercom. Shelves spilling forms, mops, brooms, a clogged-up sink filled with vodka and rum. The door was steel-reinforced; the liquor stew smelled like vomit. Shouts and thudding sounds boomed through a heat vent.

Ed banged on the door—no response. He yelled into the vent—hot air hit his face. He saw himself pinioned and pickpocketed, Bureau guys who figured he’d never squeal. He wondered what his father would do.’

(Ellroy 1997, 30)

In these extracts, the first featuring the violent Bud White and the second featuring the career-driven Ed Exley, we see a slight variation in voice; this is despite both featuring the same clipped prose and limited third-person perspective. White’s extract is almost purely action driven, an approach which dominates his chapters within the novel, barring a few exceptions. In contrast, Exley’s extract features moments of reflection; he imagines himself ‘pinioned and pickpocketed’, and then considers the hypothetical of his overbearing father in the same position, and how he would act.

The reasons for this prose variance in Stark and Ellroy’s work are two-fold: firstly, it can be used as a tool for emphasising subtle characterisation, highlighting how the character perceives other characters or the world around them. This in turn can create layers of ‘tension or resonance’ as the reader is forced to infer information from the interactions and

perceptions of the protagonist (Disher 2001, 89). And secondly, these slight variations can deftly indicate glimpses of internal thought, without resorting to the clearly internalised voice of first-person—essentially allowing the author to give insight to the machinations of investigation without sacrificing the effects of third-person:

‘Then what? Raymond was thinking, riding in the blue Plymouth police car with Hunter.

Go on...

Well, the way it should happen: With Mr Sweety’s place under surveillance Mansell walks in, comes out with the gun in his pocket and they shine lights on him and that’s it. If he stays inside they ask him to come out and eventually he does, after trying to hide the gun again or pound it apart with a hammer; but they would still have him with the gun, be able to make a case...

But he continued to picture the scene as they drove over East Jefferson, hearing, ‘That’s far enough—’ and trying to think of what Clement might say then.’

(Leonard 2005, 187-8)

In this excerpt from *City Primeval* by Elmore Leonard, we can see the protagonist Raymond Cruz hypothesising a possible situation involving Clement Mansell, a psychopathic criminal known as the Oklahoma Madman. Despite not being in first-person, we as readers are given insight into Raymond’s thoughts—these hypotheticals take up nearly two pages in the book itself. Without such insight, the manhunt would not be clear to the reader. This is because, as will be discussed in Part Three, the process of investigation for a hard-boiled or neon noir protagonist is defined more by ‘movements, observations, consciousness’ and ‘frequent unconsciousness’ than the discovery of clues (Knight 2004, 112).

If these glimpses of internal thought are necessary for the plot to maintain momentum, then why not simply write the character in first-person? Beyond the possible confusion that

may be caused by featuring multiple first-person perspectives in a mammoth text such as *Butcher's Moon* or *L.A. Confidential*, the third person point of view arguably embodies a wider thematic quality of the neon noir genre. By embracing the third-person form, the reader is no longer so quick to sympathise with the protagonists, as we do not see the world through their eyes; this arguably cements the aforementioned disparity between the 'psychologically scarred inhabitants' of the neon noir evolution and the reader (Haut 1999, 4). Furthermore, it delivers a 'vicarious and voyeuristic' experience that tinges the works with a 'quasi-anthropological' quality, almost as if we are reading a hypothetical scenario in a 'survivalist's handbook', or a bloodstained history document (Haut 1999, 3). This blurring of fact and fiction is particularly striking when one remembers, as briefly discussed in the opening chapters of this project, that the fictionalisation of history often occurs within neon noir¹².

australia

There are a number of Australian crime novels that take influence from neon noir, with many of these texts employing a third person point of view. For example, Garry Disher's Wyatt novels are reminiscent of the previously discussed Parker narratives, including subtle moments of inflection to indicate distinct elements of character:

'Wyatt spend his days in stillness, thinking, walking and sitting.

He rarely spoke. A simple request to shop or cafe staff, a nod hello to a fellow tenant, that's all...The week passed. Sometimes Wyatt cooked for himself, but mostly he walked to Southbank to eat. Then he'd stroll back to the apartment and sit, sometimes listening to jazz, concentrating on the rhythms of the music, his body and his life.'

(Disher 2010, 30)

¹² For a greater discussion see Chapter Two – Part Three.

And then later from a chapter focusing on the character Khandi, the girlfriend of a fellow heister who betrays Wyatt:

‘Khandi was ticking over nicely. Pumped since the call to the jeweller, she couldn’t wait for the call-back. The only downer was Eddie. Khandi guessed he was thinking about his skinny fucking bony fucking slag of an ex-wife. She felt the need to point out some home truths and so, in the dim main room of the shack, amid the dust, cobwebs and old frying-pan grease, she gave Eddie a few slaps and kicks.’

(Disher 2010, 133)

Much like the already discussed neon noir novel *Butcher’s Moon*, these two excerpts from Garry Disher’s *Wyatt* are both in limited third person, yet are differentiated through subtle variance—the use of slang and expletives being the most obvious. Such similarities can again be attributed to Disher taking influence from ‘Richard Stark’s character, Parker’ (Disher n.a., para. 5).

Similarly, David Whish-Wilson’s Frank Swann duology employs a third-person point of view that oscillates between characters, all the while containing brief inflections of internal thought much like James Ellroy’s best work:

‘Swann cracked his wrist and looked at the time—gone eleven. He thought about the bottle of Grant’s lying in the floor-pan rubbish, then put it out of his mind. He’d need it to sleep, later—whenever that might be.

He dropped his cigarette into the iced-coffee carton and slapped at a mosquito on his wrist...It would be funny if Swann wasn’t so desperate for work.’

(Whish-Wilson 2013, 6-7)

The lineage of such an approach is clear. Australian crime author Angela Savage even notes in a blog comment that discerning readers often refer to Whish-Wilson as ‘Australia’s answer to James Ellroy’ (Savage in Kinberg 2013, para. 25).

coffin’s reach

The third-person point of view in neon noir, as outlined earlier, creates a distance between the reader and the character, allowing a ‘vicarious and voyeuristic’ experience (Haut 1999, 3). It also removes the intimacy traditionally offered by the first-person approach, making it harder for readers to immediately sympathise with or excuse a character’s actions. In essence, creating a ‘morally ambiguous world in which people are capable of perpetrating any and every outrage’ (Haut 1999, 4-5).

As the original first-person point of view employed for Royce was far too revealing of his internal self, and thus left him too sympathetic or moral for the reader, I decided to redraft the whole novel into limited third-person. I briefly considered simply cutting back on his internal thoughts, while maintaining the dominant ‘I’ like in the hard-boiled tradition, but by doing so I would arguably lose some of the neon noir benefits of a third-person point of view, specifically the disparity between reader and character that lends the narrative an aura of verisimilitude (Haut 1999, 3).

Now that I was redrafting all three intertwining story threads into a singular point of view, I felt it necessary to differentiate each voice subtly. This would not only emphasise the differences between each character for the reader, but would also allow me to reinforce certain elements of their investigation¹³. To achieve this subtle difference of voice, I consulted my research and decided to take influence from James Ellroy, Elmore Leonard, and Richard

¹³ For a greater discussion see Chapter Two – Part Three.

Stark. This consideration, in tandem with careful planning and writing, allowed me to create three third-person perspectives that were coloured with moments of distinct introspection.

Within the final draft of the creative project, all three characters display moments of introspection, but the way these moments are presented differ greatly. As Royce's story revolves primarily around a complex investigation that underpins the entire narrative of *Coffin's Reach*, I knew it was integral for the reader to have an understanding of his thought processes—most notably how the links between revelatory clues, ideas, and conversations are made. In this way Royce's point of view arguably emulates that of Raymond Cruz in Leonard's *City Primeval*:

'Royce thought back to his meeting at the Maloney station. Phillips hadn't mentioned a vehicle that night, or the men. And neither did the report. If the woman was telling the truth though, Royce thought. Then the scenario was clear. Junkies were notorious for leaving the front door unlocked, especially when on the nod. The men in black may have let themselves inside, and then taken the boyfriend from point blank. Toxicology reported a heavy dose of heroin in his bloodstream, so there was a good chance he didn't even notice them approaching.

If the gunshot startled the girl from the kitchen, or maybe the bathroom, then she might have done a runner towards the rear. Royce imagined the shooter panicking and following her down the hallway. If he took the three shots from the bedroom door, then it might've flung her body across the bed, limbs splayed at odd angles. Just like the crime scene photograph.'

(Coffin's Reach, 414-15)

From a craft perspective, the reason for such an approach can be linked not only to avoiding reader confusion, but also to the expectations of the neon noir form. As already touched upon, the process of detection for a neon noir character revolves primarily around 'movements [and] observations' rather than traditional ratiocination; thus by revealing the internal

machinations of the detecting character, the ‘consciousness’ and ‘unconsciousness’ of such an investigation is emphasised (Knight 2004, 112).

In contrast to the in-depth moments of internal reflection featured in Royce’s narrative, such moments are far more subtle for Farrow and Nicole:

‘Farrow leant his weight against the balustrade of the verandah. He sipped his coffee and watched the heeler roam the yard, wet nose probing the tussocks of grass, tail beating the air like a metronome. Ash scaled the ground beneath the animal’s paws and the flakes had powdered his legs a dark grey.

It had been a good burn last night. Maybe the last for a long while.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 202)

And then later from Nicole’s perspective:

‘After her father left the house, Nicole struggled out of bed and dressed herself. Storm season hadn’t yet arrived, but already there were blossoms of mould growing in the recesses of her bedroom coving, even more along the faded walls of the hallway outside. She couldn’t stand the mould’s fusty odour, or the way it sapped the air from her lungs, and she pinched her nose shut as she padded towards the kitchen. The house was not even three decades old, yet it was already growing worn and weathered. And now, with her mother gone, it was only getting worse.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 209)

In each of these extracts the reader can see a flicker of internal thought in the closing sentences: Farrow considers the quality of the burn, and Nicole ruminates on the house and her mother’s departure. In very early drafts of the novel, moments such as these were telegraphed obviously, often with a *he* or *she thought*. Upon reflection of the research, however, I realised the importance of emphasising the vicarious and voyeuristic qualities of the novel through reader distance; and, as these two stories contained less detection than

Royce's and therefore required less clearly delineated moments of contemplation, Farrow and Nicole were perfect characters for embracing this neon noir disparity.

To differentiate between the two voices of the Farrow family, I carefully focused on the respective language employed during their individual scenes. Much like how Stark allows the personality of his characters to creep through into their point of view, I aimed to do something similar. For example, the often cold and detached Farrow exists in a world defined by his job as a fitter and turner, and is often described in a mechanical language—at one stage he is even like 'a machine turning down after a loss of power' (*Coffin's Reach*, 485). In contrast, Nicole, who often feels insignificant, focuses on the diminutive: '...she thumbed the worn pages. Tiny columns of black text flickered past like ants scrambling from the broken spine' (*Coffin's Reach*, 347).

This subtle differentiation is continued throughout sections of the novel focused on non-primary characters, their differences illuminated this time with slang. In a brief scene focused on Norm the truck driver, we discover his problems at work, the character noting that his apprentice is a 'bit of a tosser' (*Coffin's Reach*, 341). And similarly, in a scene with Harry, we learn that he considers his ex-girlfriend a 'slag' (*Coffin's Reach*, 454). Again, although subtle, these slight variances emphasise a difference between each character, all the while maintaining a limited third-person point of view throughout. It also gives us a subtle insight into their internal self, their characterisation revealed with an 'apparent lack of artifice' (Haut 1999, 2).

Findings

Out of every craft element discussed within this project, a reoccurring neon noir point of view has been most successfully localised by Australian writers—specifically a third-person point of view for multi-character narratives. Whether this localisation was an intentional goal on

behalf of the discussed authors cannot be wholly confirmed, however. Furthermore, it is quite possible that this third-person usage in Australian crime novels was unconscious or even coincidental, something that is highly probable when you consider it is the ‘most common point of view in fiction’ (Disher 2001, 78).

My use of third-person is wholly intentional, however, and embodies a number of expected neon noir elements discovered through the research process. By emphasising a disparity between the reader and the characters, the point of view creates a moral ambiguity that was originally missing in earlier drafts. Through careful language and structure choices, the reader is still allowed insight, however, into the personality of the characters, and the internal elements of an investigation; this is important to note, as neon noir, even with its tendency to subvert or exaggerate traits of hard-boiled, does not ultimately betray ‘the inner workings of the genre’ (Haut 1999, 11).

Furthermore, a disparity between reader and character creates a ‘vicarious and voyeuristic’ or ‘quasi-anthropological’ tone, almost as if scenes were a chapter in a ‘survivalist’s handbook’ or perhaps even stylised non-fiction (Haut 1993, 3). This approach is thematically resonant when one remembers that the real-world corruption in Queensland was first uncovered by journalists—specifically Chris Masters, who was behind the ABC television special *The Moonlight State* (1987), and Phil Dickie, who eventually went on to write *The Road to Fitzgerald* (1989). Even today the legacy of the period is examined by journalists such as Matthew Condon who recently released a trilogy of non-fiction books—*Three Crooked Kings* (2013), *Jacks and Jokers* (2014) and *All Fall Down* (2015)—focused on former Queensland police commissioner Terrence Lewis. By embracing a quasi-anthropological tone within *Coffin’s Reach*, one that is reminiscent of real world journalistic texts analysing historical corruption in Queensland, the line between fact and fiction is

blurred, and thus the examination of fictional crime ultimately becomes a means of 'analysing society' at large (Haut 1999, 3).

Part Three **Narrative**

During the early research and planning phase of the project, I quickly understood that the narrative of *Coffin's Reach*, while analysing wider aspects of crime, culture, and history in Australia, would still have to satisfy the general expectations of crime writing. This is because, as briefly discussed, neon noir does not ignore the expectations of the genre, despite its tendencies to analyse culture at large (Haut 1999, 11). Therefore, as expected of all good crime writing, I needed to develop 'a fine balance between plot-direction and character-direction' within the work (Disher 1996, 43).

To achieve this balance, it was important for me to discern the wider expectations of the neon noir narrative before beginning the writing process. Through close examination of a number of prominent texts within the evolution, alongside my wider academic research, it became clear to me that a number of reoccurring elements prevailed throughout: the neon noir narrative structure is often comprised of numerous interlocking episodes filled with sudden action, and the overall story, oftentimes influenced heavily by history, is fuelled by a distinct form of detection.

Structure

If one were to open a number of prominent neon noir novels by authors such as Richard Stark, Elmore Leonard, and James Ellroy, they would be quick to notice that each short, sharp chapter focuses on a different character's story. This is despite the fact that each text typically features a singular narrative arc. This distinctive structural approach almost mirrors a television set flickering between channels, all of them showing footage of the same criminal incident but from different angles. Such an approach not only allows a writer to provide multiple perspectives on crime and corruption, but it is also the quickest way to gain the

attention of a ‘culture obsessed by paranoia, hooked, as it were, on packageable insights, instant replays, soundbites and various post-mortem proddings’ (Haut 1999, 3). Beyond appealing to the sporadic interests of their readership, this almost elliptical neon noir narrative structure can be traced back to the emergence of hard-boiled, and the serialised production methods that defined its earliest years.

hard-boiled

Before being printed in hardcover and paperback format, longer hard-boiled narratives were consumed episodically in pulp fiction magazines—a singular story broken up over a number of issues, almost like multiple chapters in a novel. For example, Dashiell Hammet’s *Red Harvest* was first published in four issues of *Black Mask* between November 1927 and February 1928 as ‘The Cleansing of Poisonville’, ‘Crime Wanted – Male or Female’, ‘Dynamite’, and ‘The 19th Murder’ (HistMyst, 2006). Similarly, the bulk of Raymond Chandler’s seminal hard-boiled novel *The Big Sleep* appeared in *Black Mask* as the two separate, and originally unrelated, stories ‘Killer in the Rain’ (1935) and ‘The Curtain’ (1936) (McShane 1976, 68).

Although *Red Harvest* was edited heavily before its eventual publication as a hardcover by Alfred Knopf, a skeleton of the original serialisation can still be felt within the narrative of the novel, as the story can be broken into four distinct sections: the set-up, in which we are introduced to the Op and he is given his job; the rigged boxing match that ends in murder; the violent cleansing of Pete and Finn’s liquor; and finally the death of Dinah. Unfortunately I am unable to compare these original four short stories with the final print of *Red Harvest*, as they have become extremely rare in recent years—due mostly to the cheap production methods of the magazine—and have not been reprinted.

Despite sometimes contributing to a longer and more complex narrative arc, these serialised episodes were typically self-contained, each featuring its own narrative rise and fall. Furthermore, they were filled with enough action and quick-fire dialogue to pull new readers through any elements of the wider narrative they may not understand. Chandler described this approach in an introduction to the first print run of his collection *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950). Here he wrote about the need for reader excitement within hard-boiled: ‘...because the demand was for constant action...if you stopped to think you were lost. When in doubt have a man come through the door with a gun in his hand. This could get to be pretty silly but somehow it didn’t seem to matter’ (Chandler 1950, xii-xiii).

Due to the harried production techniques of the pulp period, the early *Black Mask*-era narratives were often developed as they were written, the author striving to provide immediate entertainment rather than a fully cohesive mystery (Horsley 2005, 71). Subsequently, the action-packed and almost compartmentalised chapters encouraged readers to speed through the text, ignoring, or perhaps even missing loose ends within the plot. Famously, in Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, there is no logical suspect or explanation for the murder of the chauffeur. Allegedly, after Howard Hawks—the director of the now famously influential film adaption of the novel—contacted Chandler for an explanation, he responded with: ‘Damned if I know’ (Ahearn 2008, para. 4).

This approach to serialisation arguably catered to the working-class nature of the early hard-boiled readership, who could not always afford to purchase every sequential magazine. By creating almost self-contained episodes, hard-boiled writers were allowing readers to enter their long-form narrative at any point, their enjoyment coming from visceral elements other than complexity of plot. Although it may be hard to perceive a modern reader enjoying only a fragment of a narrative, particularly when they may never encounter the beginning or

end, this widespread episodic construction of early hard-boiled echoed the segmented nature of a working-class life. As Erin Smith says in her book *Hard-Boiled*:

‘As the jobs of skilled workers were broken down into minute, repetitive tasks requiring little skill, an individual worker had less need to understand the entire process through which labor and raw materials became finished good. Just as one could read and enjoy the loosely linked scenes of action in hard-boiled fiction without being particularly concerned with the larger story...’

(Smith 2010, 82)

Because of such factors, it is easy to view a serialised hard-boiled story not as a whole, but more like scenes of ‘interlocking action’ that ‘do not respect the unities of bourgeois organization and logic’ (Smith 2010, 83).

As hard-boiled crime fiction gained a stronger cultural relevance, due in part to its dissemination through other forms of media, the narrative structure of the sub-genre slowly became more cohesive. This is due primarily to the death of the pulp industry, and the subsequent rise of the paperback novel as the predominant means of hard-boiled distribution. Around this same time, authors such as Hammett also began to shift away from the traditional story of the hard-boiled sub-genre, interpolating select aspects of adventure novels and gothic horror—for example, *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key* respectively. This slow shift to a more cohesive and sometimes experimental whole marked the beginnings of an evolution that would eventually see the emergence of the far more structurally complex neon noir.

neon noir

As briefly discussed in Part Two of this chapter, the neon noir evolution led to the production of a number of novels with multi-perspective narratives. These texts would feature a large cast of characters, often with disparate stories, and the author would switch between each to

tell a singular and cohesive series of events that comprised a wider narrative. Mentioned in this discussion was Richard Stark's influential neon noir *The Hunter*, which established the multi-perspective trend within the evolution. Shifting between the mononymous career criminal Parker and his prey Mal Resnick, the narrative structure of *The Hunter* is divided into four chapters, with the first, third and fourth devoted to Parker, and the second to Resnick. In this way, the structure almost replicates the four-part serialisation of earlier hard-boiled novels such as *Red Harvest*, albeit one that is far more cohesive. As *The Hunter* falls on the cusp of the evolution, it makes sense that this hard-boiled structural influence would linger. Furthermore, the Richard Stark novels were initially produced under similar circumstances to earlier pulp novels.

A pseudonym for the prolific writer Donald Westlake, the Richard Stark persona was created simply because 'on several occasions Don had more than one story slotted in a single issue of a magazine and was asked to use a pen name on one of them' (Block in Stark 2011, ix)—an approach many classic hard-boiled writers would employ to ensure a steady income. As time went on, however, the Parker books transcended their pulp influence, becoming analyses of the 'psychological condition of the era, the result of overlaying the drug culture on the war machine' (Haut 1999, 38). This evolution from hard-boiled roots into something far more subversive is also evident in the narrative structure of the novels, each becoming more and more complex as the series progresses, until arriving at the sixteenth novel *Butcher's Moon*.

Often considered 'the strongest book in [a] series' (Block in Stark 2011, ix) that leaves Ellroy and Leonard looking 'placid, if not cumbersome' (Haut 1999, 34), *Butcher's Moon* is an undeniably impressive neon noir crime novel. Coming back to town to reclaim a cache of lost money from a local gangster, Parker ends up causing a gang war that is only complicated by a crooked mayoral election, a kidnapped partner, and a seemingly endless

series of heists. Although the general story of *Butcher's Moon* may be deemed relatively simple in comparison to many modern neon noir texts such as those by Ellroy or Sallis, the narrative structure of the novel is inarguably masterful in its construction.

Butcher's Moon features a staggering cast of characters. Alongside a number of new gangsters, crooked politicians, and dirty cops, the story features familiar heisters from nearly every preceding Parker novel. In fact, the sheer number of reoccurring characters is so immense that the advance reading copies had to be annotated 'every time there was a reference to an earlier caper' (Block in Stark 2011, ix-x). What is truly interesting about this enormous cast of characters, however, is how they are used to tell the story: Parker, despite being the narrative instigator, is rarely the focus, and instead the novel is narrated predominately by the characters working alongside him, and against him. This allows Stark to craft a narrative that extends beyond the view of a thief and his prey, and into something far more discursive.

Eschewing the four-chapter structure found in *The Hunter* and many other Parker novels, *Butcher's Moon* offers fifty five chapters in total, with very few concurrently featuring the same perspective. Sometimes characters, such as the watchman Donald Snyder are only featured once within the narrative, but a whole chapter is dedicated to their perspective (Stark 2011, 39-46). In this way the structure creates an almost discursive experience for the reader—flashes of action and violence appearing on the page, almost like 'packageable insights...instant replays, soundbites, and various post-mortem proddings' (Haut 1999, 3). The narrative structure therefore provides a cross-section of an entire town riddled with corruption and crime, rather than the journey of a lone protagonist.

This multi-strand narrative construction continues into the work of neon noir writer James Ellroy. Although the author 'explicitly situates himself in the Hammett tradition' (Horsley 2005, 70), the large majority of Ellroy's work presents narrative structures far more

complex and labyrinthine than anything found in *Black Mask* hard-boiled. In fact, upon considering the narrative progression throughout his oeuvre, it could be argued that the narrative construction of Ellroy's latter work—perhaps most notably *L.A. Confidential*—has far more in common with Stark's mammoth neon noir text *Butcher's Moon*, than with hard-boiled classics like *Red Harvest* or *The Maltese Falcon*.

The third novel in a series of four—preceded by both *The Black Dahlia* and *The Big Nowhere*, and completed by *White Jazz*—*L.A. Confidential* tells a relatively simple story: three people are brought together after a brutal killing in an all-night diner, and are forced to work together to uncover the perpetrators. The structure of the novel, however, is far more complex. Much like *Butcher's Moon*, the narrative of *L.A. Confidential* is discursive, shifting between the three alternate cop characters to tell an interconnected story; specifically these characters are the 'straight arrow' Ed Exley (Ellroy 1997, 9), the 'brutal' bud white (Ellroy 1997, 46), and the 'hotshot' Jack Vincennes (Ellroy 1997, 298). Although not featuring as many divergent perspectives as Stark's *Butcher's Moon*, Ellroy uses a similarly 'discursive narrative to produce a massive panoply of Los Angeles in the 1950s, more assiduously detailed than that other great chronicler of the area, Raymond Chandler' (Forshaw 2007, 86).

This growing complexity of narrative structure can be linked to the evolving readership of hard-boiled, and their eventual transference to neon noir. As stylistic traits of the sub-genre were further disseminated throughout the culture during the 60s, 70s, and 80s—in tandem with the rising education standards of the working class—readers of hard-boiled either 'expected more or were subsumed by the promise of...slicker forms of escapism'; thus the classic *Black Mask* hard-boiled narrative had to evolve to compete with the growing influence of film and television—the latter slowly becoming available in every American home (Haut 1999, 8).

Narrative experimentation within the evolution was not limited to multi-perspective neon noir narratives, however, and can also be found in more traditional private investigator stories such as James Sallis's *The Long-Legged Fly*—‘the first in a series of highly original private-eye novels featuring African-American and New Orleans freelancer Lew Griffin’ (Haut 1999, 110). The structure of *The Long-Legged Fly* is broken into four clear parts, almost like *Red Harvest*, with each standing alone as individual narratives, albeit all of them featuring Griffin. These stories take place over four decades: 1964, 1970, 1984, and 1990 respectively. With a structure ‘pasted together for the sake of their internal rhythm and mood rather than for the sake of narrative development, the direction of [the novel] defies detection’ (Haut 1999, 111). In this way, *The Long-Legged Fly* ‘suggests a historical process in which linearity exists only in micro-narrative units’; by focusing on such concepts, Sallis is arguably ‘setting up the expectations of genre literature, and...standing them on their head’ (Haut 1999, 111-2). This narrative approach only becomes more complex as the Griffin series continues, and the character establishes his career as a hard-boiled novelist.

At the conclusion of the *The Long-Legged Fly*, Griffin has completed his first novel *Skull Meat* about a Cajun detective, and has started his second entitled *The Severed Hand*. He goes on to write a third in-text book named *The Long-Legged Fly*, in which he forsakes his Cajun detective for another detective, this one named Lew Griffin. Furthermore, the last line of the real-world *The Long-Legged Fly*—which is actually the first line of Griffin's *The Long-Legged Fly*—acts as the opening line to Sallis' follow up Griffin novel *Moth* (1996), the author never fully clarifying whether it is a legitimate sequel to his own novel or rather the in-text version of Griffin's *The Long-Legged Fly*. Interestingly, in *The Long-Legged Fly* by Sallis, Griffin also insists that his second novel starring the detective Griffin will be entitled *Black Hornet*, which is actually the name of the third Griffin novel by Sallis (Haut 1999, 112).

The effect of this narrative experimentation is dizzying, yet impressive from a structural standpoint. It also indicates that narrative progress within the evolution was not limited strictly to texts that focused on criminals and police, but also occurred within narratives focused on the more classic hard-boiled private investigator. Regardless, both multi-perspective narratives and structural experimentation are hallmarks of the evolution, and indicative of neon noir's gradual shift away from the comparatively simplistic approaches of its hard-boiled past.

australia

After neon noir established itself as a successor of hard-boiled in North America, limited elements of the evolution did seep into our localised crime writing. This influence is arguably most apparent in Australian texts with a direct and noted neon noir inspiration.

For example, much like Stark's zenith work *Butcher's Moon*, a typical Wyatt novel by Garry Disher shifts between Wyatt himself, and a number of secondary characters. This can be seen in the novel *Wyatt* where we have chapters from the perspective of the eponymous character, alongside those focused on the cold-blooded criminal Le Page, fellow heister Eddie Oberdin, and the latter's girlfriend Khandi Kane. In this way the structure of the novel replicates the discursive experiences found in Stark's best work, the narrative presented 'almost like packageable insights...instant replays, soundbites' (Haut 1999, 3).

This multi-perspective narrative structure can also be found in the work of David Whish-Wilson. His first crime novel *Line of Sight* features three concurrent stories in a fashion that superficially seems similar to James Ellroy's *L.A. Confidential*. These characters are Frank Swann, a local police superintendent; Harold Partridge, a high-ranking judge from the east; and an unnamed hitman. The latter character, however, is arguably superfluous to the plot, and is often forgotten in reviews; instead, the general focus is on Swann, the 'man who stands up against overwhelming odds and tries to do the right thing', and 'Victorian

Justice Partridge' who is in 'WA to head a Royal Commission into corruption that is doomed to fail on purpose' (Kissane 2010, para. 6).

Partridge is not mentioned by name on the back cover of the book itself, however, the blurb dedicated almost wholly to the story of Swann and the crime he is investigating. Perhaps this is because Partridge is primarily used as a context for Swann's experiences, the reader 'taken inside the head of the Victorian magistrate' so we can see the 'farce' of the Royal Commission that was kick-started by the Superintendent himself (Savage 2010, para. 7). This uneven character weighting is most clear in the structure of the book: Swann dominates seventeen chapters; while Partridge has fifteen, many of them featuring Swann or about Swann; and the killer has eight.

Furthermore, the mystery driving the story of the novel—who murdered a local madam?—exists with Swann alone, and is emphasised by the narrative focus on the character. In this way the novel tells the story of a singular protagonist from multiple perspectives, rather than a 'discursive narrative' designed to produce a 'panoply' of place and experience (Forshaw 2007, 86)—the general modus operandi of an author like Ellroy. Whish-Wilson's sequel text *Zero to the Bone* limits these perspective shifts to simply two characters. Swann's story still dominates, however, with the majority of the chapters dedicated to his perspective, and neither Justice Partridge or the unnamed hitman from *Line of Sight* return.

From a structural perspective, there has been some experimentation with narrative in Australian neon noir inspired crime writing. These texts, much like Sallis, eschew the multi-strand narrative perspective of Ellroy or Stark, and embrace the classic hard-boiled private investigator form. This can be seen in Zane Lovitt's novel *The Midnight Promise: A Detective's Story in Ten Cases*, where the reader is given a mosaic private investigator character study, much akin to *The Long-Legged Fly*. Taking place over ten different short

stories, the disjointed narrative can be seen almost as a tribute to the pulp format of old, each tale its own individual narrative.

Where the novel becomes interesting, however, is in the framing technique offered by the opening. Beginning with a prologue, private investigator John Dorn almost directly addresses the reader, hinting that the book itself is a factual document, written by a real person:

‘I used to lug my stories around with me like caged birds, screeching and crapping and demanding all my attention. I dwelt on my stories, which means I dwelt on myself...And that’s what this is. This is the tumbling road to a single moment that changed all that.’

(Lovitt 2013, ix)

The stories then told to the reader begin to unfold. Starting with light, humorous crimes solved by the fresh-faced Dorn, the novel slowly takes a turn into something far darker. The contents of each mini-narrative becomes increasingly more violent and depraved, and Dorn himself becomes an emotionally and physically scarred alcoholic:

‘The office smells intensely of roast beef, but there’s no sign of meals or used dinner plates or sandwiches, so the smell must come from her. She finally looks up at me and says, ‘G’day,’ but the last syllable trails off a little as she clocks the long scar across my head and comes to terms with it...

Past her, on a cluttered bench, I spot a bottle of cheap gin almost hidden behind another television and stacks of ringbinders and brochures. There’s only three or four fingers inside, but it must be the only thing to drink between here and the nurses’ station in the hospital.’

(Lovitt 2013, 265-6)

In this way, the progression of the novel almost mirrors many elements of the neon noir evolution. Dorn even loses his investigatory licence in the last few stories, effectively cinching his transformation from a Marlowe-esque private investigator, into something far more akin to Block's freelancer Matthew Scudder. In short, the character no longer has 'a witty response to every situation', nor is he 'self-righteous or excessively moral' (Haut 1999, 75). Despite this transition, however, it could be argued that *The Midnight Promise* is not a wholly neon noir novel, as this move towards the distinct traits of the evolution only occurs in the last third of the book. Regardless, it is a notable text when exploring local experimentation within the crime writing form.

coffin's reach

From its initial conception, *Coffin's Reach* was intended to be a complex, multi-story narrative with a scope large enough to encompass an entire town. Even before officially commencing this project, the rough idea that eventually manifested as the creative was historical and political in nature. And, as a writer interested in craft, I believed a discursive narrative structure would be the most suitable way to explore the expanse of crime and corruption within Brisbane. Further research only verified the viability of this narrative structure.

With this discursive narrative structure in mind, I began to conceptualise and plan the multi-perspective narrative at the heart of *Coffin's Reach*. According to Disher, three approaches prevail when undertaking this process: 'Some fiction writers say blithely that they never plan. Many plan a little, or occasionally, and a few plan in meticulous detail' (Disher 2001, 105). With a project this large and detailed, however, I knew that I would need to meticulously plan the narrative arc so as 'to stay a step ahead of the reader, and avoid coincidences, dead ends, contradictory time-lines and unlikely outcomes' (Disher 2001, 107).

My planning process involved developing an 80-page document that outlined each scene and character interaction within the narrative of *Coffin's Reach*. Upon reflection it is clear that this process closely mirrored that of James Ellroy—something that occurred organically and unconsciously on my behalf. When working on his novel *White Jazz*, the arguable ‘zenith’ of the neon noir evolution (Haut 1999, 10), Ellroy wrote a 164-page outline for the novel; similarly, when developing the earlier *L.A. Confidential* he created a 211-page outline (Powell 2012, 34).

When first planning the three stories at the core of *Coffin's Reach*—Royce's investigation; Farrow's refusal to strike; and Nicole's friendship with Bishop—there was far less crossover, each taking place almost primarily within their own singular microcosm. This was due to my inexperience with a project this large, and my fear of making it too structurally complex—not for the reader, but for myself. As I began researching and developing the first draft, however, it became clear to me that there would have to be greater connections between the disparate stories, particularly if I wanted to express the far reaching nature of the historical corruption in Brisbane, as each character's story provides a unique perspective on the same larger web of crime.

Subsequently, during these early stages of planning, I strived to ensure that my structure, while focusing on three discursive stories, worked together to create a singular coherent narrative. To achieve this I crafted each scene, regardless of who was featured, so that it offered cogent details beyond their story, albeit some that were not immediately obvious on the first read through:

‘Wayne was at the front of the crowd, leaning against the bonnet of a spew-green cruiser. A police officer sat inside the vehicle and he was slowly making his way through a newspaper. He was familiar to Farrow—McInnis, maybe McIntyre...

Someone spoke up behind them. Farrow turned to see Anders approaching across the mill floor. His suit was a different colour than last time, but still the same impeccable cut. ‘I let the police know what was happening,’ he said. ‘I was hoping a presence may deter any violence. But I assumed they would send more than one officer.’

‘You tell the trucks to go the back way?’ Farrow said. ‘Delivery guys won’t be happy with this out front.’

Anders nodded. ‘I will tell the farmers immediately. The shipping vehicles should be no concern, however. The former service had close ties to Wayne and seemed very hesitant to do business with me. So I’ve brought in my own people, affiliated with the company.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 267)

In this seemingly innocuous scene between Farrow and Anders at the mill, the reader receives foreshadowing on two major plot details regarding the crime and corruption infesting the Well. Firstly, we have McIntyre spatially associated with Wayne—the officer making an appearance at the stop-work due to his involvement with Rose’s murder and the local corruption. And secondly, we have a reveal that the shipping company is hesitant to work with the new mill owners, the reasons behind this hesitancy made clear by the novel’s conclusion. Although these details may appear minute, I consciously included scenes such as this to ensure that a tangible interconnectedness exists between the experiences of all three characters, their stories contributing to a unified whole.

As already discussed, each character, despite this narrative interconnectedness, does have individual experiences and stories that explore corruption from a different perspective. For example, Royce’s story was crafted to examine crooked cops and politicians, and how one must sacrifice themselves and those they love to banish such corruption; Farrow’s experiences with the mill explore the effects of mid-level corporate corruption on both himself, and the wider town; and finally Nicole’s slow drift into a life of petty larceny

exhibits the desperation of the ‘disorganised and the powerless regarding the powerful’ (Haut 1999, 37).

A few carefully crafted vignettes that feature differing perspectives support this panopticon narrative, all of them designed to further highlight the scope of the corruption in the Well or its effects on the main protagonists. For example, the reader briefly encounters a scene from Eddie’s perspective to emphasise that ‘there were rumblings in Brisbane again, and they weren’t looking good for the boys in blue’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 433). And a brief scene focusing on Norm makes it clear that the effects of corruption can even impact those who are not always directly involved, as he notes that Farrow’s growing violence and isolation, due in part to the mill and its questionable practices, is echoed in Nicole: ‘It was only time until she was just like her father, her face already wearing that same savage grimace, eyes cold and unflinching’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 341).

By consciously crafting a cross-section of crime and experience, my novel offers a panopticon of the Well, and furthermore the corruption in Brisbane. This cements the sheer power of the antagonistic ‘forces-that-be’, their negative influence and corruption permeating all levels of life within the Well. This idea is even considered by Royce towards the conclusion of the novel, where I write: ‘every layer of the town was rotten...no matter what you did, it would stain you’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 506).

Beyond this discursive multi-character narrative, I have also laid the foundations for future experimentation. *Coffin’s Reach* is only the first novel in an ongoing series of works that reinterpret Queensland’s criminal past, often incorporating real world history into their fictional narratives. And much like Sallis, I intend on ‘setting up the expectations of genre literature, and...standing them on their head’ as the texts progress (Haut 1999, 111-2). The scope of this subversion, however, is not yet clear with only one completed work of fiction. Therefore the remaining novels, each currently untitled, will have to be discussed briefly.

The second novel in the series is technically a prequel, and focuses on a group of detectives, including Royce's father, investigating a violent standover job. This investigation eventually leads them down a tempting path of corruption, and loosely sets up the events in *Coffin's Reach*. Taking place just after the introduction of the Vicious Lawless Associations Disestablishment Act in 2013¹⁴, the third book focuses on a true crime writer discovering ties between corrupt police and a hidden cache of child pornography. Working alongside a now retired Royce, the novel ends with the author writing a historical retelling of the events that led to the discovery of these photographs, the first line of the work an exact replication of the opening to *Coffin's Reach*:

'They were headed back to base when Royce spotted the car, a beat-up hatchback down in the scrub skirting the road, cracked taillights flaring in the darkness like dying embers. He pointed it out to Eddie in the driver's seat beside him, and the Sergeant dropped the LandCruiser down to second gear.'

(*Coffin's Reach*, 199)

The overarching narrative structure of these texts, alongside the incorporation of real world history, aims to make the reader question if the events of *Coffin's Reach* and its sequels really did occur, or were they perhaps wholly fictional? Perhaps it is fiction within fiction? Does it even truly matter? By forcing the reader to consider such ideas, I am attempting to remove the clear boundaries between fiction and reality—in essence, embracing the neon noir habit of manoeuvring 'between fiction and replication, self-reference and artifice' (Haut 1999, 12), but with local setting and history.

¹⁴ A recent law that echoed anti-protest measures first introduced during the height of corruption in Queensland.

Detection

Although the figure of the detective fell from prominence during the height of neon noir, elements of detection still appear in a number of evolution texts, specifically zero detection—a form of investigation that has its roots in the hard-boiled crime fiction sub-genre. This process of investigation, while not always bolstered through sanctioned organisations such as detective agencies or policing bodies, is a key element of the unfolding neon noir narrative, and therefore must be discussed in detail when addressing the expectations of the evolution.

hard-boiled

Black Mask inspired hard-boiled, like all sub-genres, owes a great debt of influence to its progenitor—in this case, the early crime writing of Britain. This influence, as already touched upon in Chapter One of the project, was more reactionary than evolutionary, however. Many of the quirks and idiosyncrasies that would come to define the major archetypal patterns of hard-boiled were developed directly by hard-boiled authors to address the perceived limitations of the British form.

Many hard-boiled writers, including Chandler, saw the British form as ‘dull’, ‘too contrived, and too little aware of what goes on in the world’; authors of such work ostensibly think ‘a complicated murder scheme which baffled the lazy reader, who won’t be bothered itemizing the details, will also baffle the police, whose business is with details’ (Chandler 1988, 5). Rather than providing clockwork mysteries that often relied on genius to solve and astonishing serendipity to enact, early hard-boiled delivered a more realistic vision of crime. In his 1944 essay *The Simple Art of Murder*, Chandler describes this process as giving ‘murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, and not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought duelling pistols, curare and tropical fish’ (Chandler 1988, 14).

Despite Chandler's insistence that the hard-boiled pulp story and the British clue-puzzle are diametrically opposed, some similarities do exist. For example, both the British form and early hard-boiled crime writing feature crime within their narrative. Furthermore, before the eventual emergence of neon noir, the protagonist within both was typically a detective who undertakes an investigation (Calweti 1976, 142). The mode and structure of the investigation differs greatly, however.

Instead of finding a solution to a crime through the examination of clues, the early hard-boiled detective typically solved crimes via a mode of investigation called zero detection. This process used 'movements, observations, consciousness (and his frequent unconsciousness) as [the detective's] primary method for unravelling a mystery' (Knight 2004, 112). This approach is almost antithetical to the British clue-puzzle popularised by authors such as Agatha Christie. Such texts are known for their familiar narratives in which a detective must traverse a 'carefully assembled group of possible suspects' to process a 'teasing array of clues' that eventually fit together like clock-work (Horsley 2005, 37). Chandler himself described this approach in less polite terms, citing specifically Christie's Poirot novel *Murder on the Orient Express*:

'Poirot decides that since nobody on a certain through sleeper could have done the murder alone, everybody did it together, breaking the process down into a series of simple operations like assembling an egg beater. This is the type that is guaranteed to knock the keenest mind for a loop. Only a halfwit could guess it.'

(Chandler 1988, 9)

This process of hard-boiled zero detection is perhaps most evident in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*. Within the influential narrative, the Continental Op's investigatory technique explicitly involves 'stirring things up' and then, most importantly, waiting 'so you'll see what you want when it comes to the top' (Hammett 2003, 85). The results of this 'stirring up' can

manifest in numerous ways: an unseen villain may enact a seemingly random killing (Hammett 2003, 77); a relatively minor character may appear within the plot to provide information (Hammett 2003, 93); or events might culminate in a seemingly unnecessary shootout (Hammett 2003, 121).

This ‘stirring up’ approach, though most popular in hard-boiled novels with a private investigator protagonist, also appears in many classic noir texts. For example, the story of James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, although perhaps lacking the ‘moral safety-net of detection’ (Scaggs 2007, 112), only unfolds because the transient protagonist decides to take a job in a semi-rural Californian filling station—mostly to initiate a sexually violent relationship with Cora, the boss’ wife. By taking this job, he intentionally stirs up the established order, and the narrative takes a dark turn into murder.

The driving force behind this almost chaotic and random method of detection is two-fold. Firstly, it replicates ‘not a fragrant world, but...the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting...patterns out of it’ (Chandler 1988, 17). And secondly, it could be argued the fragmented serialisation of the early pulp-fiction magazines fostered such an approach, as writers could develop narratives with very little pre-planning; characters and random events could occur as needed so as to maintain reader interest.

neon noir

Much like with traditional noir, elements of zero detection are still apparent in neon noir narratives that do not feature private investigator protagonists. For example, in the very first neon noir text *The Hunter*, career criminal Parker is pursuing a man who betrayed him, but is unaware of his whereabouts; subsequently he is forced to investigate the structures of an

organised crime syndicate to locate his prey. This process of investigation takes on the traditional zero detection form:

‘Anyway, I thought he was dead. But all of a sudden, he’s around, he’s looking for me.

‘And what is it you want, Mal? You can’t handle this guy yourself?’

‘Sure I can. But I don’t know where he is. He’s somewhere in town, and I don’t know where. Now, he’s poking his nose in, he’s asking questions, he’s stirring things up. I want to find this guy you see what I mean? Before he rocks the boat.’

(Stark 2008, 74)

In this extract, Parker’s method of finding Mal Resnick replicates the classic hard-boiled model almost verbatim. Just like the Continental Op before him, he is ‘poking his nose in, he’s asking questions, he’s stirring things up’. This approach to uncovering information continues throughout the series, and occurs again perhaps most prominently in *Butcher’s Moon* where ‘Parker and his friend’ start ‘stirring things up’ so as to drive a group of criminals out into the open (Parker 2008, 177).

This process of zero detection can also be found in the more traditional Matt Scudder novels by Lawrence Sanders. Seemingly unafraid to demystify his investigatory processes, Scudder describes how he often solves cases:

‘Either I didn’t know the answer at all until a fresh piece of information made itself instantly evident, or I knew all along who had done whatever had been done and all that was ever needed was sufficient evidence to prove it in court.’

(Sanders in Haut 1999, 83)

In this way, Scudder either used his ‘unconsciousness’ to immediately discern a criminal’s guilt, or his ‘movements, observations’ (Knight 2003, 112) to dislodge a ‘fresh piece of

information’ in the tradition of zero detection. Scudder uses this mode of investigation not only as a freelance investigator, but also earlier when working as a police officer during the 60s—a detail made believable due to the time period.

For many readers it may be difficult to reconcile zero detection with modern policing methods, particularly cutting-edge forensic techniques such as those featured in Patricia Cornwell’s Kay Scarpetta novels, which began with *Postmortem* (1990). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why many neon noir writers have begun exploring the past. Novels set during earlier time periods create a viable and believable space for zero detection to function; furthermore, they offer the author an opportunity to use the setting and methods of detection to explore a ‘corrupt historical past’ (Scaggs 2005, 130). Some authors even use this exploration as a way of critiquing the present.

This neon noir obsession with history is most noticeable in the influential novels of James Ellroy, particularly his aforementioned *L.A. Quartet*. Ellroy’s work is often built around real world events, the stories blurring the line between fact and fiction (Bradford 2007, 102)—an idea emphasised in his appropriation of the newspaper, tabloid magazine, and report form throughout his work. For example, in *The Black Dahlia* Ellroy proposes the solution to the famous murder of the same name, despite the case still remaining unsolved; similarly, many plot threads in *L.A. Confidential* begin in the aftermath of the Bloody Christmas scandal, a real world event where Los Angeles police officers brutally assaulted seven civilians. Many of these historical events, although interpolated within predominately fictional plots, involve real-world historical figures such as Mickey Cohen or Howard Hughes. These characters are not simply side-lined either, as they are often given dialogue:

‘Mickey tucked a wad under my holster. ‘Sammy says thank you. Sammy says damn good on such short notice.’

‘It was too close to home, Mick. It causes me lots of trouble.’

Mickey plopped into a chair. ‘Sammy doesn’t care for their troubles. You of all people should know the ethos of that farshtinkener crazy cocksucker.’”

(Ellroy 1993, 62)

Although one may consider this historical obsession far from contemporary, and perhaps even unrelatable for modern readers, it is important to remember that ‘when Ellroy explores the past, he is, in fact, elucidating the present’, his work exploring the ‘moral texture’ of the culture at the time of writing (Haut 1999, 151).

This focus on the past, in tandem with Ellroy’s appropriation of ‘literary, and collective’ cultural artefacts such as the classic hard-boiled form, allows him to create characters that often resort to investigatory methods focused on physical interactions and unconscious thought, rather than the processing of clues. Unshackled from the rigorous constraints and expectations of modern forensics or copacetic police work, Ellroy’s cops have free reign to stir things up and see what rises—in essence paying tribute to the hard-boiled approaches of old. This can be seen most predominately in *L.A. Confidential* where the process of furthering an investigation is seemingly defined by canvassing, interrogations, and violence:

‘A man yelled, "Sir, who’s running the interrogations?"

Green said, "Sergeant Ed Exley, Hollywood squad."

Catcalls, boos. Parker walked up to the mike. "Enough on that. Gentlemen, just go out and get them. Use all necessary force."

Bud smiled. The real message: kill the niggers clean.’

(Ellroy 1997, 117)

Although not always a direct translation of the classic zero detection model originally established in the overwhelmingly more moral hard-boiled form, the broad strokes of the process continue into neon noir. This is undoubtedly due to the authors having an immense

knowledge of the ‘pulp culture’ that preceded them (Haut 1999, 4), and the evolution’s tendency to include the ‘inner workings of the genre’, no matter how politically charged the text may be (Haut 1999, 11).

australia

As has been discussed throughout this project, a number of conventional hard-boiled elements can be found in Peter Corris’ Cliff Hardy series. This includes zero detection, which can be seen most directly in the first third of *The Dying Trade* when the private investigator visits Longueville—a psychiatric rehabilitation center—to interview a client’s sister. In a manner similar to the Op, Hardy causes trouble until he starts to see answers. This method is briefly discussed between Hardy himself and a chief doctor at the center:

‘You’ve been very troublesome, Hardy,’ he said, ‘and achieved very little, I should imagine.’

‘Why should you imagine that?’

(Corris 2012, 56)

Much like Hammett’s the Op before him, Hardy has stirred up trouble. And although it may appear fruitless to the outside observer, in this case the chief doctor of Longueville, it is a tried and true method for the classically inspired gumshoe. The Hardy character even makes light of such an idea when he chastises someone for analysing his role as detective, playfully telling them they ‘read too much Chandler’ (Corris 2012, 57).

This classic mode of investigation continues into Peter Temple’s *Bad Debts*, the first of the Jack Irish series. Beginning his investigation into the suspicious death of a former client named Danny McKillop, Irish knows that traditional ratiocination will offer no answers, and instead begins to take the gumshoe approach; Irish himself makes this clear in-

text when considering his investigation: ‘There wasn’t anything to do except see Danny’s widow’ (Temple 2012a, 35). This is arguably Irish’s modus operandi throughout every novel in which he appears: he probes people with questions until something or someone is stirred to the top, and eventually the mystery is solved. Although this dialogical approach is arguably far less violent than the Op’s original method, the result is much the same. A corrupt character notes this at the end of *Bad Debts*, threatening Irish with a ‘short-barrelled .38’ and informing him he’s been a ‘fucking pain in the arse’ for stirring up trouble (Irish 2012, 291).

In regards to policing and zero detection in Australian crime fiction, we do see instances of authors adopting Ellroy’s approach, and crafting neon noir inspired works within a historical setting, perhaps most notably David Whish-Wilson’s *Line of Sight*. Although the primary investigator of the text, Frank Swann, is a sanctioned police officer, Whish-Wilson writes him almost like a private investigator, his processes of uncovering a crime far from copacetic:

‘Knocking around career crims was standard procedure. You couldn’t get them to speak without a bit of violence, something Swann had always been told was the difference between justice and the law...’

(Whish-Wilson 2010, 43)

Arguably this approach is fostered by the time period of the novel itself. Taking place in the 1970s, the novel tells the story of a brothel madam who is found murdered on a Western Australian golf course. Based loosely on the murder of Shirley Finn, one may see parallels between Ellroy’s fictionalised retelling of the Black Dahlia murder and Whish-Wilson’s novel. But it would seem that, unlike Ellroy, Whish-Wilson is not aiming to create a fictional world that ‘mythologises the past’ (Haut 1999, 144), nor is he building ‘a new history...out of the ashes of the old one’ (Austerlitz 2014, para. 3).

Instead he seems to be using the historical setting and events as a loose inspiration for his novel, without directly or explicitly incorporating real-world fact. Obviously this does not impact the effect of zero detection within the story, nor is it a comment on the quality of the work, but it does force us to wonder if Whish-Wilson's treatment of the past embodies some of the select neon noir themes fostered by Ellroy, the 'quintessential neon noir writer' (Haut 1999, 144)—specifically his use of real-world historical events and individuals to dissect the 'corrupt historical past' of his setting (Scaggs 2005, 130).

coffin's reach

As already discussed within this sub-chapter, *Coffin's Reach* was crafted to feature a complex, multi-story narrative that examines the corruption within an entire town, and a state at large. The bulk of this examination is driven by three very different investigations: Farrow is uncovering the suspicious and deadly mill strike; Nicole is discovering her own identity by tracking down a mysterious stranger; and Royce is trying to solve Rose's disappearance.

Originally Nicole and Farrow's stories featured minimal investigating, the former's featuring near none at all, but as the research progressed I realised such a process was necessary if I wanted to examine history, politics, and culture—a hallmark of neon noir. This is because the act of investigation and eventual solution, while only the 'olive in the martini', is ultimately how the protagonist encounters the 'evils of modern society in a vivid and compelling fashion' (Phillips 2000, 2). Therefore, if I wanted to embrace the distinct analytical abilities of the evolution, I would need to implement detection—or some kind of 'stirring up'—into all facets of the narrative, and give each character an opportunity to uproot an element of crime and corruption within the Well.

When first considering how to implement zero detection into all three stories, I struggled to reconcile the expectations of the evolution with my emerging ideas. In particular,

I questioned how I could give a character such as Farrow or Nicole the power to investigate when they lacked any kind of traditional investigatory support within the context of the fictional world; for example, an affiliation with a private detective company or private business. As my research progressed, however, I began to understand that in neon noir, an evolution that tended to experiment with the expectations and boundaries of hard-boiled, the process of investigation was not always so traditional, and these alternate approaches for zero detection could be appropriated for *Coffin's Reach*.

When developing Farrow's story I drew inspiration from Richard Stark's Parker novels. In fact, many of his story elements parallel the quintessential neon noir heist novel: first, a group of men are pulled together for a risky job, and the protagonist agrees due to his desperation for money; then the job begins to go wrong and the protagonist is required to investigate the cause; and finally the problems are addressed through violence and death. Within the context of *Coffin's Reach* and Farrow's story, it is this middle investigation where zero detection most notably occurs.

Elements of this can be seen in Farrow's feelings on Anders:

'Much like his father, Farrow had the ability to peg a man's nature, to understand what made them tick. It was a skill that often separated a good fighter from a great one. But Anders was something else entirely. He was hard to read, and he had already lied once about the mill owners. Farrow believed if you were going to be working side-by-side with a man, then you needed to see his hand. He couldn't be keeping secrets, and he couldn't be telling lies.'

(*Coffin's Reach*, 335)

This almost 'subconscious' ability to discern a man's nature was an intentional fulfilment of zero detection (Knight 2004, 112), and is the key to Farrow's eventual investigation into the mill's corruption. This investigation slowly leads Farrow, a man who can often be quite

blunt, to stir up trouble with the locals in an attempt to draw them out, much like the Op, Parker, and Scudder before him:

‘The remaining millers crowded the television above the bar, an old game of cricket playing out across the screen. Fitzie’s boy, Thomas, was among them and his rake arms crept out from a sleeveless band t-shirt. During an ad break he peeled away from the group. ‘How you been, Harry?’ he said.

The older man nodded.

‘Was here this afternoon. Saw what happened.’

‘And what exactly did you see?’ Harry said.

The kid laughed. ‘Old-man Farrow starting shit.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 454)

In a fashion similar to her father, Nicole’s story involves an uncommon and non-copacetic investigation—albeit one that is far subtler and less directly influenced by any specific neon noir text. Regardless, the character was written to feature a subconscious intuition that leads her through the narrative. For example, when searching for a house to break into, she relies on her unconsciousness to confirm that a house is empty:

‘After half an hour of searching, Nicole found what she was looking for. The letterbox out front of the house was filled with unopened mail and the carport was empty. On top of that, something inside her told her it was the right place—maybe it was experience, maybe it was intuition. Regardless, she knocked on the front door and placed her ear against the wood. When there was no answer or movement inside, she made her way around back.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 239-40)

Similarly, when searching for Bishop on the hillside bordering the town, this ‘something’ uncoils inside her once again, helping her to find his shack:

‘When they finally reached the foothills bordering the town, the girl’s hair had grown matted with sweat and her legs were tender and sore. She took a bottle from her mother’s calico bag, poured water into her cupped hand, and offered it to the panting dog. The animal’s hot breath trilled through his nose as he lapped at her palm. The man had to be around here somewhere. She couldn’t say why, but she just knew.’

(*Coffin’s Reach*, 304)

This is not to say that Nicole only relies on her unconscious abilities, however, as she also has tenacity for uncovering information through verbal interactions. For example, when Nicole tries to narrow down Bishop’s identity, she visits her neighbour Norm and tricks him into revealing information about Bishop through a false story (*Coffin’s Reach*, 290). Although vastly different characters, this scene—and, by extension, Nicole’s subtle verbal skills—echo ‘the conversational gambits’ of Lawrence Block’s Matthew Scudder character, and Ed Exley in *L.A. Confidential* (Haut 1999, 84).

Within *Coffin’s Reach*, Royce’s story was undoubtedly the most complex in regards to implementing zero detection. This is due in part to the intricacy of his journey and the wider qualities of his profession. Quite often, particularly in more modern crime writing, the appearance of a police officer indicates that a text may be following a procedural model, which typically outlines the ‘quotidian details of a cop’s life’ in an ‘absorbing fashion’ (Forshaw 2007, 80). In such stories, the police officer works as one cog of a larger machine, which gives them a sense of community. As such an approach would arguably betray certain elements of the neon noir characterisation, it was important for me to make Royce an isolated ‘maverick cop’ like many neon noir police officers before him; in this way he could be ‘just as much as a loose cannon as the private eyes’ (Forshaw 2007, 79).

Echoes of this ‘loose cannon’ private eye are made clear through Royce’s methods of zero detection. For example, when Royce goes to the pub for the first time to question the local clientele about Rose, his appearance causes Lynch to run away, which in turn shifts their investigation to Mick, and eventually leads to Royce’s discovery of the Maloney murders, this last element cinched by a chance encounter with a woman in a café. This chain of narrative events was carefully constructed around Royce’s original visitation to the pub, the character even making this clear to the reader later in the text: ‘All this because a pervert legged it at the sight of you...’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 431).

Furthermore, Royce was written to rely heavily on his unconscious observations to progress his investigation, rather than traditional ratiocination or consideration of clues. This can be seen when he confirms the driver of the hatchback through his memory of the menorah in Madeline’s lounge room: ‘Two thoughts arose in Royce’s mind—the lounge-room of Rose’s grandmother, and the necklace they had found’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 254). In this way, the character’s story emphasises an investigation powered by ‘observations...and unconsciousness’ (Knight 2004, 112). The process of investigation is also inherently personal—as it is driven by Royce’s internal thoughts—and thus emphasises the isolated nature of his journey.

Furthermore, this process of zero detection is facilitated by the time period of the narrative, which was an intentional choice on my behalf even before commencing the project. By setting my story during a period of extreme police corruption, Royce can stretch the moral and legal boundaries of his investigation without fear of ramification. This can be seen in a scene where he practically assaults a crippled standover man:

‘The man let out another growl. He tried to lift his hand towards Royce’s shoulder, but instead his whole body began to shake.

Royce pinned the man's arm down, squeezed the wrists. 'Just tell me where she could be. Or tell me who the bent copper is.'

The man said something, the sound nothing more than a gurgle. Royce leant closer, listening as he tried to speak again.

The man's face contorted into a grimace. '...I'm so...'

(Coffin's Reach, 443-4)

Beyond allowing Royce to conduct his investigation in a neon noir manner, this 80s setting also offered me an opportunity to embrace the evolution's tendency to blur historical fact and fiction (Haut 1999, 2). As already established, the story of *Coffin's Reach* predominately takes place in 1985 at the peak of institutional corruption in Queensland. This historical web of criminal activity was so expansive that it encompassed the long running Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen and the Police Commissioner at the time Terrence Lewis—a long rumoured member of the Rat Pack, a group of men who paved 'the long and twisting road' that led to Fitzgerald's Royal Commission (Dickie 1989, 2).

Originally, the novel took place in an unspecified year prior to Fitzgerald's Royal Commission, as I wanted to take advantage of the investigatory freedom offered by this time period. Furthermore, the institutional corruption prevalent at the time was a perfect thematic element to employ within the narrative. As I continued to research the possibilities of neon noir, however, I quickly realised that the year would have to be specific if I wanted to mythologise history, essentially blurring the line between fact and fiction, as Ellroy does.

As I continued to research the real-world history of crime and corruption in Queensland, I discovered a number of important cultural events had occurred between 1985 and 1988, many of them thematically relevant to the plot of *Coffin's Reach*. Although it would be impossible to include every historical detail from this time period, I decided to interpolate select real-world elements into the plot: for example, Joh Bjelke-Petersen's push into federal politics is referenced through a radio discussion (*Coffin's Reach*, 221); the 1987

Boggo Road riot caps Farrow's story (*Coffin's Reach*, 494); and the Painters and Dockers long history of corruption, particularly in regards to drugs, is explored through the wider narrative (*Coffin's Reach*, 430).

Admittedly, these are somewhat peripheral references to real world events, and do not fully mythologise the past like Ellroy does. To achieve this neon noir attribute, I included a direct reference to Investigative Journalist Chris Masters' controversial television special about crime and corruption in Queensland, which eventually led to the Fitzgerald Report (Dickie 1989, 169-73). And, much like how Ellroy incorporates characters such as Mickey Cohen and Howard Hawks into his fictional works, I have included Masters as a character within the novel, albeit in a flashback from Royce:

‘Nearly a year ago now, Royce had received a phone call from Masters, a television journalist working on a corruption expose. He wanted to talk to Royce in person about what had happened, and why there had been no ramifications within the force. Anna had her reservations, but they both ended up meeting him in a little café just outside of Ashgrove, and Royce had told him everything—Rose, the mill, McIntyre. About how every layer of the town was rotten, and that no matter what you did, it would stain you.’

(*Coffin's Reach*, 506)

This discussion with the fictional Masters ultimately contributes to the in-text television special that eventually led to the Fitzgerald Report. In reality, however, the ABC special featured very little about drugs and importation—particularly in a manner similar to my novel narrative—and was instead focused primarily on prostitution and gambling. Regardless, by weaving local historical fact into the narrative, I am mythologising the past, and creating an alternate history for Brisbane that will continue into my later books, and will dissect the ‘corrupt historical past’ of the state (Scagg 2005, 130).

While such an approach may focus on what has come before, this dissection will offer me an opportunity to engage with political and cultural issues still lingering in modern Australia; much like how Ellroy's most famous work examines the 'moral texture of the Reagan-Bush era' by uncovering the local sins of the past (Haut 1999, 151), *Coffin's Reach*, and my future work, are able to examine issues still lingering within modern Australia—most notably police and institutional corruption.

Findings

It would seem that a number of reoccurring neon noir narrative elements do exist within Australian crime novels. For example, *Line of Sight* by David Whish-Wilson has a structure that revolves around numerous different perspectives, a narrative that involves zero detection, and the story unfolds in a historical setting that encourages this distinct process of investigation. These elements are not always employed to the same degree, however, as their North American counterparts.

Line of Sight may feature multiple character perspectives, but the narrative is weighted towards Frank Swann, effectively reducing the scope of the work. Furthermore, while undoubtedly facilitating the process of zero detection, the setting doesn't mythologise or analyse history like Ellroy's best work does, and does not examine the 'corrupt historical past' of the setting (Scagg 2005, 130). Short of discussing the craft intentions of Whish-Wilson's book with the author himself, or undertaking similar conversations with his Australian crime writing counterparts, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons Australian crime writers do not always embrace such approaches. My work, however, does aim to embrace the potential of the neon noir narrative structure outlined by the research results, and a number of conscious decisions were undertaken to ensure this.

Firstly, I crafted a multi-perspective narrative reliant on three character's stories. In this way, each was as important as the other, and could not exist individually to the same effect. This provided a panopticon of the crime and corruption at the center of *Coffin's Reach*, and allowed me to reinforce its sheer historical scale. Furthermore, detection—in this case zero detection—was included within each character's story so as to contribute to the analytical possibilities of this panopticon. This detection is reliant on the time period of the novel, however, but such a setting also gives me an opportunity to include real historical figures and events to further blur the line between fact and fiction. In this way, a text like Coffin's *Reach* may still obey the 'inner workings of the genre' (Haut 1999, 11), but it offers a latent exploration of the politics, history, and culture of its setting.

Part Four Symbolism

In his book *Writing Fiction*, Disher discusses how ‘an emblem of the setting, if repeated, can also act as a symbol’ (Disher 2001, 139). Thus, in many novels, symbolism often manifests directly in relation to the representation of the setting. Disher himself offers two examples of such a manifestation:

‘...a family lives in a house in which there are three china figurines on a mantelpiece, representing the moral precepts ‘See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’. These figures might be used by the writer to symbolise the actions or hypocrisies of the family members. Washing left on a line for several weeks might symbolise half-measures or carelessness.’

(Disher 2001, 139)

During the early stages of planning and research, I began to consider the symbolic qualities of my setting. The original idea that eventually developed into *Coffin’s Reach* took place in an unspecified rural area of Australia, but I soon considered it unsuitable for the project, as most North American neon noir texts feature an urban setting. For this reason I began to transition my narrative from its original setting into something far more recognisable to the evolution. This process revealed a few key issues, however: firstly, this new urban setting, while familiar to neon noir readers, was ultimately interchangeable with numerous North American urban locations, and struggled to represent something distinctly Australian; and secondly, any effort to address this issue ultimately negated key expectations of neon noir prose, particularly its tendency to avoid large descriptions of setting¹⁵.

¹⁵ For a greater discussion see Chapter Two—Part Five.

Urban

Whether it is Detroit in Elmore Leonard's *City Primeval* or Los Angeles in James Ellroy's *White Jazz*, the city figures as the primary setting in neon noir. It must be stressed that these cities, while often internationally famous, are not portrayed in a touristic manner, and are instead dominated by dark alleyways, trash-strewn streets, and institutional crime. This positions the city 'not as the site of the American dream, but as the epicenter of an all-consuming nightmare'; it is viewed not 'as a malignant space' but as 'the epitome of everything corrupt capitalism has achieved' (Haut 1999, 179).

Although undeniably intrinsic to the evolution, this obsession with the symbolic metropolitan did not occur suddenly with the shift towards neon noir, but instead appeared in a number of ancillary hard-boiled texts—particularly those that cemented the broader expectations of the classic form.

hard-boiled

The metropolitan has always appeared within crime writing to some degree, and can even be found in the earlier roots of the British form. Despite the distances or economic divides he may traverse in select texts such as *The Hounds of the Baskervilles* (1902), one struggles to imagine Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes straying too far from his equally famous and urbane address 221B Baker Street in London. Similarly, when characters such as Agatha Christie's Poirot or Miss Marple were 'lured out to isolated country mansions to contemplate a peculiarly strange and puzzling murder, they themselves were always bringing a touch of the city into sleepy little villages and desolate moors' (Calweti 1976, 140).

Black Mask era hard-boiled, despite distancing itself from this anterior British form, continued a connection with the urban, but transferred it into the roiling and often labyrinthine streets of pre-Second World War America. Inhabiting major cities echoing Los

Angeles, San Francisco, and New York, the hard-boiled story presented an urban setting that was ‘a wasteland devastated by drugs, violence, pollution, garbage, and a decaying physical infrastructure’ (Scaggs 2007, 70). Furthermore, the protagonists of such stories, as discussed earlier in the project, were left isolated and ‘very much alone amid the chaotic din’ (Abbott 2002, 2-3). This lack of personal connection can be thematically linked to the layout of the city itself. Within the urban environment of the early hard-boiled novel, ‘resources and space are limited...inhabitants are dwarfed by the buildings which block their horizons and intrude, drab and ugly, on their lives’ (Hamilton 1987, 26):

‘I lay on my back on a bed in a waterfront hotel and waited for it to get dark. It was a small front room with a hard bed and a mattress slightly thicker than the cotton blanket that covered it. A spring underneath me was broken and stuck into the left side of my back. I lay there and let it prod me.

The reflection of a red neon light glared on the ceiling. When it made the whole room red it would be dark enough to go out. Outside cars honked along the alley they called the Speedway. Feet slithered on the sidewalks below my window. There was a murmur and mutter of coming and going in the air. The air that seeped in through the rusted screens smelled of stale frying fat. Far off a voice of the kind that could be heard far off was shouting: “Get hungry, folks. Get hungry. Nice hot doggies here. Get hungry.”’

(Chandler 2010, 247)

This distinctive urban setting has often been used as an artifice for symbolism within hard-boiled—the ‘labyrinthine and menacing’ streets implying danger and isolation, a ‘world of shadows’ (Hamilton 1987, 26). Despite the menace of such a setting, however, the protagonists of hard-boiled are intimately acquainted with the metropolitan, and it is ‘down these mean streets [they] must go’ (Chandler 1968, 533).

This setting could also symbolise greater social issues such as the progress of capitalism and corruption. For example, consider this extract from *Red Harvest* where the Op first arrives in the bleak industrial city of Personville—a place the locals aptly nickname Poisonville:

‘The city wasn’t pretty. Most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness. Maybe they had been successful at first. Since then the smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against the gloomy mountain to the south had yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess...The first policeman I saw needed a shave. The second had a couple of buttons off his shabby uniform. The third stood in the center of the city’s main intersection—Broadway and Union Street—directing traffic, with a cigar in one corner of his mouth. After that I stopped checking them up.’

(Hammett 2003, 1-2)

The symbolism of law and order is clear in this extract’s setting. Although the town itself may be striving for an ostentatious façade, emerging industry has slowly turned everything into a ‘yellow-smoked’ monotony—almost like a body in the earliest stages of decay. Furthermore, the police are slovenly and uncaring of public perception, despite the originally ornate nature of the town. This symbol becomes cemented later in the narrative when the Op realizes that the chief of police makes no effort to hide that he is ‘pretty thick’ with the local gangsters (Hammett 2003, 8), the police force essentially an extension of the town’s criminal syndicate.

Within hard-boiled crime writing, the symbolic qualities of a setting are not limited to street level experiences, however, and will also appear when a protagonist traverses the more erudite echelons of society:

‘The room was too big, the ceiling was too high, the doors were too tall, and the white carpet that went from wall to wall looked like a fresh fall of snow at Lake

Arrowhead. There were full-length mirrors and crystal doodads all over the place. The ivory furniture had chromium on it, and the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows. The white made the ivory look dirty and the ivory made the white look bled out.’

(Chandler 2005, 16)

In this extract from Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, it is clear that the private investigator Marlowe can see through the façade of the Sternwood home. Much like the dysfunctional family themselves, the mansion is a tapestry of conflicting ideas: medieval stain-glass murals, Turkish rugs, and ornate baroque fireplaces. In this way the setting symbolises a common theme in Chandler’s work; in a city preoccupied with ‘fakery and artifice’, ‘social climbers attempt to imitate the expensive bad taste of the wealthy’ (Scaggs 2007, 71). This preoccupation is of particular interest to the average working class *Black Mask* reader, as a major appeal of the sub-genre was the private investigator’s ‘skill at reading class and social position from details of dress and décor’ (Smith 2000, 17)—a skill that readers themselves perhaps wished they possessed.

neon noir

Within the neon noir evolution, this often menacing, isolating and corrupt city still figures as a primary setting. It is furthermore often employed as an artifice for symbolism. As already discussed in the beginning of this sub-chapter, the symbolic qualities proffered by the neon noir metropolis indicate that the setting is a ‘malignant space, and the epitome of everything corrupt capitalism has achieved’ (Haut 1999, 179).

The malevolent nature of the neon noir city is clear in Elmore Leonard’s *City Primeval*—the title itself almost indicative enough:

‘The three guys were coming across the street. They looked like undertakers. They were opening their black suitcoats and reaching inside... they drew pistols and began firing at him. He couldn’t believe it. Right out on the street, three guys he’d never seen before in his life shooting at him through the fence, not wanting him to wait-up there, find out if he was the party they wanted...’

(Leonard 2005, 168)

In this extract we see the Oklahoma madman—a crazed killer within the story of the novel—come under attack from an unknown party of organised criminals. The nature of the Detroit setting is clear when we realise that this attack is taking place out in the open, almost like a western shootout. The idea is even emphasised by the novel’s often forgotten subtitle: *High Noon in Detroit*. Interestingly, despite this prevalence of violence on a street level, the city itself is being gentrified by capitalist expansion, the latter perhaps the cause of the former:

‘But then all of a sudden—as Clement edged his gaze to the right a little—there were the massive dark-glass tubes of the Renaissance Center, five towers, the tallest one seven hundred feet high, standing like a Buck Rogers monument over downtown...Clement would swivel his gaze then over downtown and around north—looking at all the parking lots that were like fallow fields among stands of old 1920s office building and patches of new cement...past the nine-story Detroit Police headquarters, big and ugly, a glimpse of the top floors of the Wayne County jail beyond the police building, and on to the slender rise of the Frank Murphy Hall of Justice, where they had tried to nail Clement’s ass one time and failed.’

(Leonard 2005, 31-2)

Here the results of capitalist expansion literally loom over the police station and courthouse, indicating the power of the rich over law and order in an era when ‘white-collar crime [was] reaching pandemic proportions’ (Haut 1999, 135).

In a world where random acts of deadly violence can occur out in the open, and corporate corruption informs the streets, only certain individuals can survive. In Lawrence Block's *The Sins of the Fathers*, the protagonist Matthew Scudder describes the attributes required to traverse such a setting:

'I got down on one knee. I picked up his right hand in my left hand and put my face close to his. His eyes were wide and he was frightened, and I was glad because I wanted him to be frightened. I wanted him to know just what fear was and just how it felt.

I said, 'Listen to me. These are hard, tough streets, and you are not hard enough or tough enough. You better get a straight job because you can't make it out here, you're too soft for it. You think it's easy out here, but it's harder than you ever knew, and now's your chance to learn it.'

I bent the fingers of his right hand back one at a time until they broke.'

(Block 2001, 193-4)

This malignant and often corrupt setting continues into the work of James Ellroy. By the time we reach the feverish and almost apocalyptic *White Jazz*, the last novel in the *L.A. Quartet*, the urban setting—while still maintaining these pre-established attributes—begins to be described by a 'surfeit of signifiers', which 'threatens to render it meaningless'; subsequently, Los Angeles is viewed as a series of 'fevered dreams' or snapshots, rather than a concrete setting (Haut 1999, 186):

'Westerns and Adams—the whores briefed nice—quasi-deputies for the night.

Bluesuits out in force: popping tricks, impounding trick cars.

Prostie vans behind Cooper's Donuts; Vice bulls bagging IDs. Men stationed southbound and northbound—hot to foil sex prowlers hot to rabbit.

My perch: Copper's roof. Ordnance: binoculars, a bullhorn.

Dig the panic:

Johns soliciting whores—cops grabbing them. Vehicles impounded, van
detainment—fourteen fish bagged so far, prelim Q&A...’

(Ellroy 1993, 105)

This constant wave of places and features, distinct to both real-world Los Angeles and a more general North American metropolitan setting, creates a sense of ‘centrelessness’ that is ‘crucial to Ellroy’s fiction’ (Haut 1999, 187). His presentation of a ‘multitude of identifiable urban points’ ultimately creates a ‘false centre around which the novel revolves’ (Haut 1999, 187). Such an approach arguably overwhelms the reader, creating a sense of ‘fevered’ uncertainty or paranoia, as they have no tangible sense of location to anchor themselves to (Haut 1999, 145). In essence, like the characters themselves, they are searching for something to grip onto in a world ‘dark with something more than night’ (Chandler in Haut 1999, 179). Furthermore, beyond this centrelessness, a surfeit of urban signifiers can also elucidate the ‘sheer scale of American experience’ (Haut 1999, 145); the borders of the setting, as outlined by these urban signifiers, is often quite broad, and will continue to expand over the course of the narrative as the protagonist undertakes their investigation, indicating the sheer geographical scope of the crime and corruption driving the narrative.

australia

When local Australian publishing houses began to foster a hard-boiled crime writing scene within the country, the setting often employed was far from wholly Australian. For example, Alan G. Yate’s Carter Brown mysteries, the earliest locally produced appropriation of the form, rarely took place in Australia. Instead, the setting was often an unidentified transpacific transplantation reminiscent of Hammett, Chandler, or Spillane (Knight 1997, 134). Other local crime texts that eventually broke away from this trend—such as Richard Claperton’s *You Can’t Take It With You* (1968) and Ian Hamilton’s *The Persecutor* (1965)—took an

almost disinterested view of their Sydney city setting, as if the location didn't matter at all (Knight 1997, 135).

In this way, the realism and authenticity expected of the North American hard-boiled form was not fully embraced. This leaves the hard-boiled protagonist unable to develop a 'deep privacy with the city' and subsequently 'he has nowhere to ground his values'; as Knight says in his book *Continent of Mystery*: 'these novelists are [therefore] as inauthentic to Sydney as the wartime pastiches and 'Carter Brown' yarns are to their imagined or fantasized America' (Knight 1997, 135). A 'deep privacy' with an Australian city setting was arguably achieved, however, with the work of Peter Corris—most notably his Cliff Hardy private detective novels.

Although this intimate approach to setting may be familiar to avid readers of *Black Mask* inspired hard-boiled, Hardy's connection with Sydney seemed 'almost revolutionary' in the landscape of 1980s Australian crime fiction, the character driving 'around Sydney...noting places, their traditions, their peculiarities, with an engaged, appreciative interest' (Knight 1997, 167). Such an approach stands stark against Corris' predecessors in the sixties, who often oscillated 'awkwardly between silence and tourism' when discussing setting (Knight 1997, 168). Despite fulfilling this expected 'deep privacy' of hard-boiled crime fiction, the city setting within the Cliff Hardy series often veers away from the shadowy mean streets of Hammett or Chandler, however, and into something far more touristic:

'The Regal dominates a stretch of the Parade at Bondi; it's white, of course, with a few turrets, one of which supports a flagpole and flag. The palm trees on either side of the entrance would go better in Singapore, but they're doing their best...The suntanned people outnumbered the pallid, although it was only October. You can sunbathe all the year round in Sydney if you pick your spots...'

(Corris 2012, 1)

As neon noir is ‘predominately an urban genre’ in its North American form, it should be unsurprising that a number of modern Australian crime texts still feature metropolitan settings (Haut 1999, 4). It could be argued, however, that these texts are influenced overtly by their North American counterparts. For example, in Sally Breen’s neo-noir *Atomic City* (2013), the ‘raucous light and noise’ of Queensland’s Gold Coast casinos is clearly reminiscent of the Las Vegas gambling strips of Nevada (Breen 2013, 8); and in Garry Disher’s Wyatt novels, the reoccurring metropolitan Melbourne setting, bisected by ‘damp and narrow’ alleys ‘smelling of urine and garbage scattered by rangy cats’ (Disher 1994, 41), can almost be seen as an analogue for the mean streets of Lawrence Block’s New York.

Alongside these common North American urban elements, we do see a number of Australian crime texts adopting the surfeit of signifiers found in Ellroy’s novels:

‘On the Westgate Bridge, behind them a flat in Altona, a dead woman, a girl really, dirty hair, dyed red, pale roots, she was stabbed too many times to count, stomach, chest, back, face. The child, male, two or three years old, his head was kicked. Blood everywhere. On the nylon carpet, it lay in pools, a chain of tacky black ponds.

Villani looked at the city towers, wobbling, unstable in the sulphurous haze. He shouldn’t have come. There was no need.

‘This air-conditioner’s fucked,’ he said...’

(Temple 2009, 1)

In a fashion similar to James Ellroy, Temple presents a deluge of identifiable urban points in *Truth*, the wave of details almost preventing the reader from anchoring themselves within the setting. By bombarding us with familiar details, the author is creating an uneasy, shifting effect: we start with the protagonist standing on the Westgate bridge, then cut to a distant flat, and then settle on an image of towers even further away. Much like the city towers discussed within this extract, the setting of *Truth* is almost overwhelmingly ‘wobbling, unstable’.

It could be argued, however, that these urban descriptors, while specifically drawn from Melbourne, ultimately mirror universal elements of the metropolitan, albeit often coupled with grisly discoveries: ‘He remembered them all. Bodies in Housing Commission flats, in low brown brick-veneer units, in puked alleys, stained driveways, car boots, the dead stuffed into culverts...entombed in walls, embalmed in concrete...pushed from buildings, tossed from bridges’ (Temple 2009, 31). Obviously there are select aspects of the novel beyond setting that could only exist within Australia—for example, some of the political and historical themes—but, in regards to the setting and its symbolic qualities, it would seem as if Temple has pursued the familiar ‘negative urban drama’; an approach that ultimately contributes to the ‘Ellroyesque’ qualities of the text (Knight 2011, 78).

Regardless of such influence, this setting is seemingly symbolic of Villani himself who is living an unstable life. The character is torn between family and work; between being a cop in a crooked system and maintaining his ‘determined quest for something like truth’ (Knight 2011, 78). Interestingly, the only time this setting arguably settles, and we lose this bombarding of identifiable urban points, is when the character retreats to an almost spiritual rural setting—an idea that will be discussed in greater detail later in this sub-chapter.

coffin’s reach

From a craft perspective, setting is arguably ‘indivisible from the other elements of fiction...and will enhance a story or novel by way of its atmosphere and relationship to the characters’, often through elements of symbolism (Disher 1999, 133). For such reasons, I knew that selecting an appropriate setting for *Coffin’s Reach* was integral to its overall success—both in regards to localising neon noir expectations, and purely as a work of fiction—as an inappropriate or thematically incongruous setting would arguably detract from the other elements of craft discussed throughout this project.

As already outlined in this sub-chapter, the neon noir protagonist regularly inhabits a decaying urban setting, one that is symbolically a ‘place of shadows...and violence, where the discrepancies between the powerful and the powerless have become obvious’ (Haut 1999, 180). Before starting this project, the creative revolved around a semi-rural setting, the events transpiring in an unspecified Australian town. Due to the results of my unfolding research, however, I decided to transition the narrative into a more traditional neon noir location: Brisbane City.

Obviously, as this metropolitan setting differed drastically to a rural one, a number of narrative elements became divergent so as to better work within the urban setting. For example, the mill stop-work was changed to an abattoir strike; Nicole’s story with Bishop became gang related; and Royce’s investigation was to be far more traditionally procedural due to the support of his fellow officers. Beyond these changes arguably betraying a number of already discussed neon noir expectations, this urban setting was widely problematic from conception:

‘Royce dropped the patrol car into reverse. He began to ease the vehicle down the cement drive and onto the bitumen. Thunder rumbled outside the city limits, a distant flash of lightning blanched the dim interior of the patrol car. The day had been long and hot, black clouds brewing over the river, and Royce had spent his whole shift fighting the prickle of a growing migraine...

They followed the main road away from Fortitude Valley, passing shops restaurants, bars. A few lingering drinkers sat by the road’s edge, and they emptied their guts into the wet gutter, dark alleyways stretching away behind them, the walls stained with filth.’

(Coffin’s Reach, abandoned draft)

These early sections of prose, written mostly to experiment with the symbolic qualities of a city setting, were unsuitable for the project. Although undoubtedly true-to-life, this urban

setting for *Coffin's Reach* was in essence interchangeable with a number of other major cities around the world—particularly those featured in neon noir. Arguably, the only way to make this setting more indicative of Brisbane or Australia was to spend more time lingering on the description, but this would ultimately betray some of the neon noir prose expectations: 'If it's only to create atmosphere...you don't want to go on too long. The reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people' (Leonard 2005, 7). It was for such reasons I began to consider reverting the novel back to its more distinctly rural setting, and commenced research into the viability of this setting for a neon noir narrative.

Rural

As previously discussed in the opening chapter of this project, when a crime is committed in a rural environment, it lingers within the community and requires great effort to dispel. As historian Evan McHugh writes:

'In cities, one day's grisly murder is rapidly overtaken by the next day's shocking slaying, but in the outback, crimes often occur where 'nothing ever happens'. This factor throws outback crime into sharp relief.

Then there's the influence exerted by the outback itself. Its sheer size and the fact that it's largely uninhabited creates an environment that presents challenges to criminal investigations rarely encountered in other countries. Where do you begin to look for the suspect, clues or even the victim? How do you cope with the logistics of an investigation that encompasses vast areas?'

(McHugh 2009, viii)

One of the questions that kept recurring to me during the process of research and writing was: would such a setting offer the symbolic qualities expected of the neon noir evolution? While 'predominately an urban genre' (Haut 1999, 4), neon noir does feature some texts that take place in a rural location, and they are often symbolically defined by isolation or danger. But

admittedly this is not exclusive to the evolution. In fact, the groundwork for this neon noir rurality can be found in the classic hard-boiled sub-genre, where a number of authors begin experimenting with the qualities of such a setting.

hard-boiled

As *Black Mask* inspired hard-boiled slowly shifted away from the pulp fiction format and into paperback, the setting of the narratives also began to change. A number of hard-boiled authors such as Jim Thompson and James M. Cain began to experiment with narratives set in comparatively isolated rural environments. Interestingly, many of the texts that attempted this transition from city to country also eschewed the private detective figure as the protagonist—each perhaps individual symptoms of a much wider evolution that led to neon noir.

In Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the murder at the heart of the narrative occurs out in the mountainous Californian foothills:

‘The Greek never noticed anything for a while. We passed a little summer colony that they call Malibu Lake up in the hills, and there was a dance going on at the clubhouse, with couples out on the lake in canoes...We started up the first long up-grade, into the mountains. There were three miles of it...And then, when we looked out and saw how dark it was and what a hell of a looking country those mountains were, with no light, or house, or filling station, or anything else in sight, the Greek came to life and started an argument.’

(Cain 1981, 46)

In this extract, the landmarks of civilisation slowly fade from the setting as Nick and Cora work their way up the mountain, until they reach an isolated spot to murder the Greek. Such a description subtly intimates the ‘inevitable doom’ of both protagonists (Scaggs 2007, 110): Cora is dead by the novel's end, and Nick has received the death penalty after being falsely

accused of her murder. Like the setting around them, their chance for a settled future, represented by the signs of civilisation and the typical couples dancing and canoeing, slowly falls away until there is ‘no light...or anything else in sight’ (Cain 1981, 46).

The use of rural isolation as an artifice for symbolism is continued throughout Thompson’s *The Killer Inside Me*. In the words of Deputy Sherriff Lou Ford, the psychopathic protagonist of the novel, the main setting Central City is not much more than a ‘wide place in a Texas road’, and had been ‘laid out in a little valley amongst a lot of hills. There just wasn’t any room for the newcomers, so they spread out every which way their homes and businesses, and now they were scattered across a third of the country’ (Thompson 2010, 4). The sheer space of this setting creates a sense of isolation, and arguably symbolises the ‘alienated position’ of Lou Ford who, like the homes and businesses of Central City, stands separate from his fellow townsfolk (Horsley 2002, 130).

One may argue that by placing a hard-boiled narrative within these rural settings, select expectations of the sub-genre may be missing. Most notably, it could be perceived that the distinct symbolic menace and disconnection of the metropolis is lost in the rugged foothills and open fields. Upon consideration, however, it becomes clear that a number of similarities appear between the distinct city setting of early hard-boiled and the rural locations sometimes used in later texts.

Much like the hard-boiled metropolis, a rural setting can be defined by a sense of isolation or disconnection. This isolation, however, isn’t caused by architectural intrusion, but rather the lack thereof. Within the rural setting of hard-boiled, ‘space is absence, the civilization that isn’t there; the gap that must be bridged. Space isolates towns, ranches and individuals...Silence is the auditory equivalent of space, and it works in much the same way’ (Hamilton 1987, 14). Consider the expanse of Central City in Thompson’s *The Killer Inside Me*: instead of compartmentalised streets, we have open plains and valleys; instead of the

bustling din of the city, we have silence. Each is drastically different, but both serve to create a sense of isolation that contributes to the greater hard-boiled aesthetic.

As already discussed, the hard-boiled metropolis often presents a dangerous and violent environment for the protagonist. A rural setting similarly poses such a threat; ‘alien...with difficult terrain [and] vast emptiness’, the landscape offers symbolic dangers and often becomes an isolated site for violence (Hamilton 1987, 15). This can be seen in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, where the Los Angeles foothills are not only symbolic of the main character’s slow fall from humanity, but also Nick’s literal and metaphorical downfall—the character slips while retrieving his hat from a smashed vehicle, and tumbles down a precarious incline (Cain 1971, 53). This unforeseen event, caused by the environment itself, is intrinsic to his eventual death at the close of the novel.

neon noir

Much like hard-boiled before it, neon noir features various rural environments. For example, a number of Richard Stark’s Parker novels take place in a location beyond the city limits: *The Score* is about a heist in an isolated ‘box canyon’ mining town (Stark 2009, 20); and *Ask the Parrot* unfolds along the ‘back roads and dirt roads’ of a mountainous rural community (Stark 2006, 39).

In each setting, the sheer isolation of the landscape symbolises a menace and danger, especially for a man like Parker. In *Ask the Parrot*, Parker goes on the run after a failed robbery, and, through a series of events, ends up a participant in the manhunt for himself, Parker working alongside a local group of vigilantes searching through the wilderness. During this manhunt, a mountain dweller named Thiemann explains the danger of such a place for criminals like Parker:

‘Spreading himself comfortably across the backseat, Thiemann said, ‘What I’m guessing about these robbers, I’m guessing they’re city people, and they aren’t gonna know what it means to try and hide out in a place like this.’

Parker said, ‘How’s that?’

‘People like Tom and me,’ Thiemann said, ‘we been here generations, it’s like we got our grandparent’s memories mixed in with our own. We know this chunk of the planet Earth. No city person’s gonna know a city like we know these hills. A stranger tries to move through here, tries to hide out in here, somebody’s gonna see him and say, ‘That fella doesn’t belong.’ You can’t hide around here.’

‘I see what you mean,’ Parker said.’

(Stark 2006, 41)

There are some clear parallels between this statement from Thiemann, and the aforementioned Scudder quote about the needed qualities of a neon noir street dweller. It would seem then that no matter the nature of the environment, whether it be city or rural, a neon noir setting will pose some kind of danger to the protagonist—in this case the landscape will reveal trespassers almost as if sentient.

In some neon noir works, the rural and metropolitan are combined in a near elliptical fashion, the chapters switching between each setting rhythmically. In James Sallis’ 2003 novel *Cypress Grove*, the first in the Turner series, the setting oscillates between a small southern town and a typical metropolitan setting. Each features the character Turner, albeit in a different phase of life, and each uses setting as an artifice for symbolism:

‘I heard the jeep a half mile off. It came up around the lake, when it hit the bend, birds took flight. They boiled up out of the trees, straight up, then, as though heavy wind had caught them, veered abruptly, all at once, sharp right. Most of those trees had been standing forty or fifty years. Most of the birds had been around less than a year and wouldn’t be around much longer. I was somewhere in the middle.’

(Sallis 2003, 11)

In this excerpt we see the menace of the landscape through the harshness of language: the jeep *hits* the bend, birds *boil* up out of trees, then *veer abruptly*. Beyond this, however, we also get the symbolic quality of the avian journey. Turner lived an honest life for the most part, working as a cop—an institution that has existed much longer than himself, much like the trees. But after an accidental shooting, his life took a sudden and violent veer into a life of crime; he was forced to leave the police, and was eventually sent to jail. Much like the birds, he was ejected from his sanctuary and shunted sideward into a life that did not last long at all.

This symbolic approach to setting continues into the urban sections of *Cypress Grove*:

‘He hauled the beast down Jefferson towards Washington Bottoms, over a spectacular collection of potholes and into what appeared to be either a long-abandoned warehouse district or the set for some postwar science fiction epic...A four floor apartment house across the street had fallen into itself and a young woman sat on the curb outside staring at her shoes, string of saliva snailing slowly down a black T-shirt...a huge rotting wooden tooth hung outside the onetime dentist’s office to the right. The empty lot to the left had grown a fine crop of treadbare auto tires, bags of garbage, bits and pieces of shopping carts, bicycles and plastic coolers, jagged chunks of brick and cinder block.’

(Sallis 2003, 17-8)

Although there was ‘no difficulty for *this* boy, rejoining society’ (Sallis 2003, 17), army veteran Turner is trying to pull himself together in a post-Vietnam America. After experiencing the ‘green even greener than that I’d grown among’ fields and jungles of Vietnam, Turner is surprised to experience a metropolis even more ‘alien’ than any battlefield (Sallis 2003, 16-7). In essence, the excerpt above explains Turner’s motivation for becoming

a police officer, an element not fully discussed in the book; the city itself, and by extension crime, is simply another war to be fought. For Turner, navigating the city is akin to ‘making [his] way through the wilderness’ once again (Sallis 2003, 17). Even in this city setting, a metaphorical non-urban parallel exists, and it is one symbolically defined by danger, death, and loss.

It must be noted that, while the rural often figures as menacing and isolating within neon noir, the direct corporeal danger of such a setting is often linked to the actions of people—whether it be direct crime, the effects of corruption, or the lingering psychological trauma of war. Perhaps this is because the evolution is primarily concerned with the ‘effects of deregulation and privatization...social inequality, corruption, violent crime and a culture driven to extremes by the era’s cut-throat economics’, and the setting, rural or metropolitan, is used as an artifice to symbolically explore such themes (Haut 1999, 5).

australia

While often focusing on the metropolitan, a select number of Australian texts with neon noir influences do feature rural settings. For example, in Garry Disher’s second Wyatt novel *Paydirt* the protagonist takes up temporary work in a South Australian outback town, all the while planning his next heist. Despite this real-world Australian setting, however, there are distinct elements that paint the location as somewhat transpacific, specifically the more desolate border cities of North America. The population of the town Wyatt is inhabiting is not only filled with South American immigrants—mostly Chileans who have ‘overstayed their visas’ (Disher 1994, 10)—but the harsh ‘sunlight blazed’ setting brings to mind the expansive rural distances of Arizona or even New Mexico (Disher 1994, 51).

A more quintessentially Australian rural setting can be found in the isolated coastline of Peter Temple’s *The Broken Shore*. While still acting as a symbolic tool, this setting lacks the

menace expected of neon noir, however, and instead offers something far more ‘reverential and almost spiritual’ for the damaged protagonist—the landscape an artifice for memory (Przewloka 2014, 3):

‘After they had all breakfasted, he loaded the dogs and set off for his mother’s house. Near the coast, he took the road that ran between the two volcanic hills, their caldera lakes home to swans, ducks, swamp hens, wicked-eyed bickering gulls by the hundreds. The lakes were never known to dry up. Cashin thought about the swims in them when he was living with the Doogues. They rode out on bicycles, five or six boys. They waded out in the black water, cold mud oozing through their toes, shivering on the hottest days. They walked around the dead tree trunks, avoided the branches that lay almost submerged like big snakes, green with moss and slime, streaked with birdshit.’

(Temple 2007, 201)

This almost therapeutic representation of rural Australia continues into the sequel novel *Truth*. As already discussed in this sub-chapter, Temple employs a surfeit of urban signifiers to describe his Melbourne setting in a manner reminiscent of James Ellroy. The only time this approach arguably dissipates is when the character retreats to the rural. In such instances, the landscape takes on a quality very similar to the coastal setting of the preceding novel *The Broken Shore*.

Numerous times throughout the story of *Truth*, Villani travels to his father’s isolated rural home, which is hidden among a forest he helped plant with his family. In a fashion similar to the coastal setting of *The Broken Shore*, this setting is ‘almost spiritual’ for the protagonist, acting as a point of reminiscence and emotional healing (Przewloka 2014, 3):

‘Below them a forest, wide and deep and dark, big trees, more than thirty years old. Planted by hand, every last one, thousands of trees—alpine ash, mountain swamp gum, snow gum, southern mahogany, sugar gum, silvertop ash...

In the spring, Villani helped him fence off a big rectangle behind the stables, rabbit-proof fence. They put the acorns in plastic pots, in a mixture of river sand and soil, a weekend just to do that...He remembered the delight of the morning he saw tiny green oak tips had broken the soil, dozens and dozens, as if they had received some signal. He couldn't wait for Bob to get home to show him. ‘

(Temple 2009, 40)

Although a bush fire exists on the fringes of this rural location—leaving a ‘burning world’ behind littered with ‘blackened vehicle carapaces, paddocks of charcoal’ (Temple 2009, 16)—there is little symbolic menace in the setting. Instead, it is a way for the character to escape the pressures and dangers of his city life, which is no surprise when one remembers Villani is simply a ‘farm boy’ who has come to the city (Villani 2009, 406).

A more oppressive rural Australian setting does appear in David Whish-Wilson’s *Zero to the Bone*. Investigating the suspicious death of a geologist, the now unemployed Swann travels out to the Western Australian desert to inspect a gold mine:

‘Swann followed Oats along the ledge of rock and down through some boulders until they walked again onto the ocean of flat red sand, marked only by the prints of emu and kangaroo and sheep and goat, the intermittent scrape of lizard tail and the curved patterns of snake...Oats walked directly through some tangled wait-a-while about a hundred metres into the scrub, zebra finches thrumming as they passed. He stopped Swann with a hand that reached back against his chest. ‘Careful.’

At their feet was a mine shaft that sank vertically into the hard dirt, braced with boughs of hand-sawed river gum.’

(Whish-Wilson 2013, 173)

With its references to ‘flat red sand’ and ‘emu and kangaroo’, it is undeniable that such a setting is iconically Australian. Furthermore, it offers none of the spiritual qualities of

Temple's work, the setting a place of 'hardship and tragedy' rather than spiritual healing (Whish-Wilson 2013, 175). This setting only appears briefly at the mid-way point of the text, however, with most of the surrounding story taking place in the much more urban Perth. In this way, the rural in *Zero to the Bone* is only fleeting, and arguably forgotten in the larger context of the narrative.

coffin's reach

Upon discovering examples of neon noir within a rural location, I contemplated returning the narrative of *Coffin's Reach* to its original non-urban setting. In this way I could not only capture an iconic image of the Australian landscape and culture, but also maintain a sense of menace, as my research strongly indicated that such a place could support the symbolic qualities of neon noir; but only if I avoided the reverential and spiritual aspects found in Australian crime novels such as Peter Temple's *The Broken Shore* (Przewloka 2014, 3).

After much deliberation, I decided on placing the narrative specifically within a south-west Queensland cane farming town. This location was suitable for the novel as not only was I familiar with such locations having grown up near very similar towns, but it also provided a scaffolding to emphasise a number of neon noir traits relevant to the narrative. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the size of the town itself acts as a symbol for the isolation of each character:

'For the first time Royce truly understood the expanse of his posting, the sheer distance that separated the farms and homes. The Well was a small town in population, but not in space. He tried to picture the near three hundred kilometres that lay between him and his old home in Brisbane, but it was almost too much to fathom.'

(*Coffin's Reach*, 234)

As already discussed earlier in this sub-chapter, the isolation typically associated with an urban neon noir setting can be successfully replicated in a rural setting, as ‘space is absence, the civilization that isn’t there; the gap that must be bridged. Space isolates towns, ranches and individuals...Silence is the auditory equivalent of space, and it works in much the same way’ (Hamilton 1987, 14). The Well itself, despite being populated with a number of notable and dangerous characters, is spread out across the face of the landscape—almost segregated from the wider world by the surrounding foothills. In this way, a life in the Well is one of isolation, and that can be terrifying, perhaps even ‘too much to fathom’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 234).

Beyond this sense of isolation, the landscape was written to be menacing and perilous—albeit due to the effects of crime and corruption more than anything else. I aimed to make this clear through descriptions of the setting. For example, in the very first vignette from Bishop’s perspective, the pathway leading to the mine is described almost as a vicious animal ready to attack, like a guard dog protecting Rose’s body: ‘He thought of the mine’s entrance. The opening was a great maw cut into the sunken earth of the foothill, barbed stones like teeth ready to strip flesh from bone’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 301). And again, later in the story, Royce is ambushed and badly beaten by masked men, the group emerging from the cane as if the landscape itself was birthing the violence: ‘Something large moved in the brake below him. He turned to see three men emerging from the cane’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 432).

Beyond the natural elements of the landscape, the setting of the Well is also pockmarked with crumbling edifices such as the mill, the remaining farmhouses, and abandoned shopfronts. Despite their innocuous appearance, these structures are malignant in the context of the narrative: the mill and its manager are tied to drug-related criminal activity, ‘the...delivery system [used] for distribution’ (*Coffin’s Reach*, 430); the homes almost reactively attack Nicole, a window shattering and spraying glass ‘inwards across her bare

forearms' (*Coffin's Reach*, 371); and the shopfronts are a scene of conflict for Royce, a man eventually revealed to be McIntyre tackling him and 'punching him in the ribs' (*Coffin's Reach*, 465).

These descriptions and scenarios were consciously crafted to create an aura of malevolent danger, particularly in regards to setting—almost as if the characters, and in turn the readers themselves, cannot trust the fields, the crumbling farmhouses, or the cane. Furthermore, many of these locations are arguably the result of 'everything corrupt capitalism has achieved' in the Well (Haut 1999, 179), their existence indebted to bad business investments, poverty, and the real-world corruption that existed in Queensland at the time. Exploring such subject matter is intrinsic to the neon noir model, as the process of 'mapping the city and its political vectors...reveal the price society must pay for economic growth' (Haut 1999, 183).

Finally, the high number of locations visited over the course of the narrative was an intentional choice to imbue the work with a sense of centrelessness. In a fashion similar to how Ellroy represents a 'multitude of identifiable urban points' to create a 'false centre around which the novel revolves' (Haut 1999, 187), I wanted to present a number of Well landmarks, each featuring distinctly Australian elements, so as to emulate the same effect. By emphasising the sheer scope of the location—we visit farmhouses, cane fields, the mill, the police station, the Squats, the pub, the local grocer's, Lynch's flat, etc.—the reader is essentially unanchored; they are searching for something tangible to hold onto, much like the characters themselves. As Royce himself notes, the crime impacting the well is 'different...There was nothing concrete to hold onto' (*Coffin's Reach*, 251).

This approach furthermore symbolises the sheer scope and impact of the crime. The violent and corrupt actions of a few stretch through the town itself, and all the way to Maloney, Warwick, and Brisbane. Unlike the locked room mysteries often found in classic

clue-puzzle crime narratives, the criminal act at the heart of *Coffin's Reach* was written to be far greater and socially entrenched than the sole death that initiates the plot, and therefore cannot be restricted to a singular location. Thus the crime cannot be expunged simply by apprehending a murderer, an act that, in the classic British form, would dissipate the threat (Knight 2004, 81). In this way, *Coffin's Reach* is examining a culture and history of crime, rather than a singular criminal act, and can dissect the broader 'contradictions and conditions of a decaying society' (Haut 1999, 3).

Findings

From the research discussed in this sub-chapter, it would appear that Australian crime authors are often hesitant to position the rural as symbolically menacing and isolating, and instead treat it as a place of reverence. And those who do embrace such menacing qualities, for example David Whish-Wilson, often do not feature such a location as the primary setting of their work. Perhaps this hesitancy to embrace the symbolic qualities of a rural setting is a reaction to the traditional portrayal of the Australian outback.

As already discussed earlier in the project, early Australian crime writing often portrayed the landscape as a 'strange and difficult world' comprising of 'exotic landforms' (Knight 1997, 15). Convicts and other settlers who arrived here in the late 1700s viewed the landscape with foreign eyes, fearing the 'flora and fauna' and the 'equally remarkable indigenous inhabitants' (Knight 1997, 15). After many years of colonial settlement, however, modern Australians are familiar with the idiosyncrasies on offer by the distinct landscape, and often romanticise them through tourism—all despite the inherent dangers they may still offer. Thus, in many neon noir inspired novels such as *The Broken Shore* by Peter Temple, the landscape becomes 'consoling' for the protagonist, rather than a threat (Knight 2011, 77).

Within *Coffin's Reach*, the setting was intentionally designed to be isolating and dangerous. The latter element is not limited to the natural, however, as much of the menace within the Well has been brought about by people—the mill strike, the drug trade, the murders all a symptom of greed, crime, and corruption. Residents of the Well have good reason to be afraid; not because of what may lay unknown in the wilderness, but because of what men are willing to do out in the light of day. This is emphasised in a conversation between Royce and a server in Maloney:

“I remember the stories my Oma used to tell me. When she was a little girl, they opened the gold mines. Some rich bloke from Sydney built them thinking he was getting in on a boom. But it was all a waste. He spent years digging into the hills to find nothing at all. Ended up killing a fella when the shaft collapsed. But that’s the Well for you. History of bad luck. Place will chew you up and spit you out. Been that way ever since they built it.’

‘What do you mean?’ Royce asked.

The woman leant over the counter, excited to be spinning the yarn. ‘Well, from what I understand, the settlers had nothing but trouble. Someone nearly burnt the place down with a cane fire one time, and it left half the buildings lost. And then years after that a couple of fellas came through and killed one of the farm owners. Apparently he had been holding back their pay. Coppers refused to do anything about it so they took it into their own hands.’

(Coffin's Reach, 397)

From a symbolic perspective, this deliberate presentation of setting embodies not only the immediate neon noir expectations of isolation and menace, but also presents a ‘culture driven to extremes by the era’s cut-throat economics...social inequality [and] violent crime’ (Haut 1999, 5). The far reaching expanse of this corruption can furthermore be emphasised through a surfeit of signifiers, their distinctly local nature reinforcing the Australian setting.

Part Five **Prose**

Character, point of view, narrative, symbolism and theme are all important craft elements to consider when developing a work of fiction, but such elements alone are not enough to compel readers; instead, the ‘words on the page...must also compel’ (Disher 2001, 177). Ideally an author will select a prose approach that most benefits his or her work, but this is not always a simple process. As Debra Adelaide identifies, this process of choosing a style raises a number of questions: ‘How does one choose a style? Isn’t style just a result of the story, something incidental? And doesn’t it come naturally, without needing to be thought about?’ (Adelaide 1996, 122). Obviously the term ‘style’ has many connotations within different fields of research, but in the context of this sub-chapter it refers to the author’s prose design or procedure.

As a creative writer, I am most interested in the construction of prose, and how this very deliberate construction may impact the reader’s experience with the text. This leads me to carefully consider the style of my work before writing: how long are the sentences? What kind of words will be employed? How will the dialogue be presented? And so on. Furthermore, while planning, I will also consider how the ‘arrangement’ of my prose, both descriptive and dialogical, may create subtle ‘shifts of emphasis’ to implicate latent information or exposition to the reader in a subtle way (Disher 2001, 185).

Construction

When first reading a neon noir novel, the distinct approach to prose is immediately clear for the reader: the evolution is ‘typified by a straightforward prose style, tinged, in many cases, with vernacularisms and a dark and irreverent humour’ (Haut 1999, 4). This realistic and often accessible approach to prose creates a style of writing where the ‘predominant artifice is its apparent lack of artifice’ (Haut 1999, 2). Although this approach is inherent to neon noir,

the roots of the evolution can be traced back to the hard-boiled pulp fiction magazines, and the stories featured within—particularly those that embraced an ‘economy of expression’ (Shaw in Horsley 2005, 76).

hard-boiled

In the early *Black Mask* inspired hard-boiled narratives, the structure of the prose was notably terse and direct, often lacking the complexity associated with more traditional literary writing:

‘I went out to hunt for MacSwain. Neither city directory nor telephone book told me anything. I did the pool rooms, cigar stores, speakeasies, looking around first, then asking cautious questions. That got me nothing. I walked the streets, looking for bowed legs. That got me nothing. I decided to go back to my hotel, grab a nap, and resume hunting at night.’

(Hammett 2003, 93)

This excerpt from Hammett’s *Red Harvest* gives a strong indication of the type of prose featured in classic hard-boiled—simple and almost film script-like in its character movement. In this way, the prose is arguably journalistic; relaying events as they occur, much like the *Newgate Calendar* under the direction of Knapp and Baldwin. This approach continues into later hard-boiled works appearing after the collapse of the pulp industry, including the work of Mickey Spillane. Indebted stylistically to the work of Race Williams before him, Spillane offers a ‘tough, insensitive, overtly masculine’ prose style very much aligned with his sub-genre forefathers (Scaggs 2005, 29):

‘The words hit me hard. In there was my best friend lying on the floor dead. The body. Now I could call it that. Yesterday it was Jack Williams, the guy that shared the same mud bed with me through two years of warfare in the stinking

slime of the jungle. Jack, the guy who said he'd give his right arm for a friend and did when he stopped a bastard of a Jap from slitting me in two. He caught the bayonet in the biceps and they amputated his arm.'

(Spillane 2006, 5)

A predominantly simple language was used by hard-boiled writers to immediately catch a reader's attention and appeal to their, as it was perceived by academics at the time, uneducated and simplistic sensibilities—the 'economy of expression' a vernacular understood by the working class (Horsley 2005, 76). Furthermore, the terse almost journalistic prose allowed maximum characterisation, setting, and story to be delivered to the reader in the shortest amount of time possible; a necessary requirement due to the serialised nature of the early form.

The brevity and simplicity of hard-boiled language can also be attributed to the production methods of the pulp fiction industry. Authors were often paid by the word and were subsequently forced to produce prose as quickly as possible to maintain a living—writers averaged 3,000 to 5,000 words a day, while some even produced 80,000 words a month (Smith 2010, 21). This 'tradition of the *literary worker*' continued into the evolution that eventually rose from the sub-genre, and would explain the hard-boiled stylistic echoes that can often be found in neon noir (Haut 1999, 3).

neon noir

Building upon the work of pioneering hard-boiled writers, neon noir continued the 'tough, insensitive, overtly masculine' prose established by editor Joseph T. Shaw and the *Black Mask* school (Scaggs 2005, 29), all the while edging closer to journalistic simulation (Haut 1999, 3). In this way, neon noir has become a style of writing 'whose predominant artifice is its apparent lack of artifice; consequently, the line separating fiction and reality has become

increasingly blurred' (Haut 1999, 2). An artifice free style is epitomised in the work of Elmore Leonard, who is known for 'capturing the rhythms of urban life' through his limited use of 'adjectives, adverbs, or length descriptions' (Haut 1999, 133). This realistic prose approach is undoubtedly the most striking aspect of Leonard's oeuvre, particularly as his 'story-lines are rarely integral to his work' (Haut 1999, 133).

In his book *10 Rules for Writing*, Leonard discusses his approach to crafting prose, and unsurprisingly a number of his rules echo the prose approach of early hard-boiled. Firstly, Leonard advises writers to avoid opening a novel with weather or a prologue, as the 'the reader is apt to leaf ahead looking for people' and action (Leonard 2010, 7). Never use a verb other than 'said' for dialogue, and don't use an adverb to modify the verb. Otherwise you will 'interrupt the rhythm of the exchange', which will ruin the fast-paced reading experience (Leonard 2010, 29). Avoid detailed descriptions of characters, places, or things, or you will 'bring the action, the flow of the story, to a standstill' (Leonard 2010, 55). And finally, and perhaps most importantly, try to leave out anything a reader will tend to skip. This is his 'most important rule' and the one that 'sums up the ten' (Leonard 2010, 69).

'The windowless file room, about seven-by-eleven, held three folding chairs, an old office table and a wall of built-in shelves where closed case-records were stored. On the wall directly behind Clement was a stain, a formless smudge, where several thousand heads had rested, off and on, during interrogations.

Wendell said, 'How well you know Edison?'

Clement grinned. 'Detroit Edison?'

'Thomas Edison.'

'I never did understand nigger humour,' Clement said.

'Man whose car you were driving this evening.'

'That's his name? I just call him Tom. Only nigger I ever knew owned a Chevy. He loaned it to me.'

(Leonard 2005, 74)

This fast paced, quasi-journalistic approach, seen here in an excerpt from Leonard's *City Primeval*, is clearly indebted to the early prose style of *Black Mask*. And Leonard's dialogue—which is strewn with colloquial syntax and racial epithets—continues the sub-genre's general *modus operandi*: hard-boiled aimed to give readers a 'good meaty melodrama written in the kind of lingo they imagined they spoke themselves' (Chandler 1968, 530), albeit now updated to the neon noir era.

Leonard's last two rules—avoiding detailed descriptions and eschewing anything readers may skip—have arguably reached their zenith in the later work of James Ellroy. Starting with the far more conventional hard-boiled novel *The Black Dahlia*, Ellroy's prose became notably starker with the release of *L.A. Confidential*. Told by his editor to cut over a hundred pages from the working manuscript 'without altering the thematic emphasis or shifting any of the specific scenes' (Rich 2009, 15), Ellroy began to craft a prose style terser than anything to have appeared prior within the sub-genre. Because the story itself was frantic, violent, and full of action, Ellroy saw value in 'writing in a fast, clipped style', so he 'cut every unnecessary word from every sentence' (Rich 2009, 15).

In his *Paris Review* interview, Ellroy describes the prose of *L.A. Confidential* not as minimalist, but rather telegraphic: 'Telegraphic means straight sentences—subject, verb, repetitions with slight modifications' (Rich 2009, 16). It also implies quick, direct information delivered to the reader without fuss; the focus never lingering for more than a line or two. This distinctive approach can be seen from the very first chapter:

'Bud White in an unmarked watching the "1951" on the City Hall Christmas tree blink. The back seat was packed with liquor for the station party; he'd scrounged merchants all day, avoiding Parker's dictate: married men had the 24th and Christmas off, all duty rosters were bachelors only, the Central detective squad was detached to round up vagrants: the chief wanted local stumblebums chilled so they wouldn't crash Mayor Bowron's lawn party for underprivileged kids and

snarf up all the cookies. Last Christmas, some crazy...whipped out his wang, pissed in a pitcher of lemonade earmarked for some orphanage brats and ordered Mrs. Bowron to “Strap on, bitch.””

(Ellroy 1997, 9)

As the ‘need to evolve as a writer has been a constant factor in Ellroy’s oeuvre’ (Haut 1999, 145), he began to push the boundaries of this already extreme prose style. In his next book *White Jazz*, the fractured narrative was delivered to the reader through an extremely clipped and oftentimes confronting telegraphic prose style that, while not suitable for every neon noir novel, captured the characterisation of the protagonist David Klein:

‘Junior set it up. Perfect: a Niggertown street cordoned off; bluesuits guarding the alley. Reporters, prowling cars, four jackets and ties packing twelve-gauge pumps.

Sergeant George Stemmons, Jr, Snapping quick draws.

Hubbub: porch-loafing jigs, voodoo eyes. My eyes on the target—closed curtains, a packed driveway—make a full shift inside working bets. A cinderblock shack—figure a steel plate door.’

(Ellroy 1993, 11)

Although this excerpt may seem very similar to *L.A. Confidential*, subtle differences exist in the prose. At this stage of his career, Ellroy’s style had almost become beat poetry—the rhythm of each sentence, combined with the page placement, echoing the be-bop jazz so predominately featured in the narrative and title. Each sentence is not only telegraphic, but also broken by punctuation: em dashes and colons fracture the rhythm of sentences like staccato ‘honk/blats/wails’ of a wild saxophone, the effect ‘not music, not noise’ (Ellroy 1993, 77) but something far more ‘paranoid, jagged, enervated’ (Rich 2009, 16).

australia

Much like early hard-boiled crime fiction, the locally produced Carter Brown novels were released with an almost production line intensity. Debuting with *The Lady is Murder* in 1955, Alan G. Yates, working under the Brown pseudonym, produced seventy one novels over four years; that's roughly one and a half novels a month, or approximately 18,000 words per week. This number finally peaked in 1985 with around 300 novels (Johnson-Woods 2004, 165). This production intensity, alongside the conscious influence of previous North American hard-boiled stalwarts, led to a prose style very much in the pulp fiction tradition.

As already discussed, the strenuous production expectations of the pulp fiction industry led to a very specific prose style within hard-boiled: terse, direct, and often lacking a complexity of structure associated with more literary writing.

'Outside I lit a cigarette and waited. I heard the sound of running water stop almost immediately, but it was another ten minutes before she came out. She dried herself off, and had a huge bathtowel wrapped around her body, from shoulders to ankles. Her face was pale but composed—no tears, no nothing. There was a steely glint in her eyes for a moment, but then she smiled and it disappeared.'

(Brown 1977, 112)

The parallels between this Brown excerpt and the archetypal hard-boiled prose style are clear. The author employs primarily declarative sentences, a simple vocabulary, and almost script-like character movement.

Although produced at an equally staggering rate, Corris' Cliff Hardy novels eschewed the production-line process of the traditional pulp fiction novel, and were published in a far more expensive hardback print (Knight 1997, 136). The prose, however, still echoed the lineage of the sub-genre:

‘I was feeling fresh as a rose that Monday at 9.30 a.m. My booze supply had run out on Saturday night. I had no way of replenishing it on the Sabbath because we still had Sunday prohibition on Sunday then. I didn’t have a club; that’d gone a while before, along with my job as an insurance investigator. I also didn’t have a wife—not any more—or friends with well-filled refrigerators. Unless I could be bothered driving twenty-five miles to become a bona fide traveler, Sunday could be as dry as a Mormon meeting hall.’

(Corris 2012, 7)

This hard-boiled influence on prose continues into a number of prominent Australian novels, particularly those indebted to Corris’ seminal work. For example, Peter Temple’s Jack Irish novels echo the writing of hard-boiled stalwarts such as Hammett and Chandler:

‘The church door was open. Inside, the blood of the martyrs fell from the stained-glass windows and lay in pink patches. The air smelled of incense, stale vase water and brass polish.

I didn’t see him at first. There was a row of pillars across the church and he was sitting in front of the one nearest the wall to my right: man in his early forties, crew cut blond hair, little folds of tanned fat over his collar.’

(Temple 2012b, 3)

Temple’s later body of work slowly moved away from this classic hard-boiled prose style, however, towards something far more fragmented. This is most notable in his last novel *Truth*, which eschews ‘the staccato prose rhythms that typify the genre’ and instead ‘opts...for long sentences that do their work over several clauses, blooming and shrinking, and achieving strange, impressionistic effects’ (Gordon 2010, para. 4).

‘At the end of the night, a sound from the street woke him, rubber shriek, a hoon, they were naked, sheet thrown aside, a light from the unclad window lay upon

them. She was on her spine, face to him, denied by a page of hair, her hands folded at her throat, her hipbones jutting, the dark in her delta.

Sleep gone, a new day but the old day in his mouth—old day, old week, month, year, life. A middle-aged man with no address, his possessions in the boot of his car.

Villani slid from the bed, stood, moved to collect his clothes.’

(Temple 2009, 215)

Upon initial reading, one may think that this excerpt from *Truth* echoes the previously discussed sections of *White Jazz*, but Temple’s fastidious detailing of static images arguably positions the novel as something far more reflective than telegraphic—the focus lingering on details, sometimes for paragraphs at a time, rather than moving forward with plot and character.

A more quintessentially neon noir prose style can be found in former rock musician Dave Warner’s novel *Big Bad Blood*, an epic crime saga about King’s Cross in Sydney, and the type of crooked men who inhabit its darkest recesses. Those familiar with James Ellroy will instantly see echoes of his style in Warner’s novel:

‘In Burns’s eyes Ray could see the quick flash of a half-thought: pay Shearer off. Then the eyes went dead, Burns coming back to reality, no paying off Shearer. Ray looked down at the bookie: greedy prick didn’t realise how lucky he was. Ray dressed for the races, not wanting to soil his one good shirt. Shaloub had said ‘No mercy’. Well, Burns was doing a little bit better than he deserved.’

(Warner 1996, 3)

This emulation is unsurprising, as Warner styled *Big Bad Blood* on Ellroy’s body of work. As the author himself said: ‘It needed a more muscular, taut tone...I quite unashamedly borrowed from James Ellroy’s super tight, prose’ (Warner 2013, para. 5). In this way the text arguably becomes more of a neon noir appropriation than a localisation—Warner riffing on

the established form like the musician he is. This is not uncommon for the author, as his previous novel *City of Light* similarly, as often stated by the author himself, appropriated the ‘single story’ approach of ‘Chandler’s style’ (Warner 2013, para. 4).

coffin’s reach

Over the course of researching and planning the creative component of this project, the prose style changed dramatically. When writing the first draft of *Coffin’s Reach*, my thoughts on prose were simple: if I want to write neon noir, why not emulate the zenith? Therefore I was using an extremely clipped style, punctuated with em-dashes and colons, indebted to Ellroy’s *White Jazz*—often considered the peak of neon noir (Haut 1999, 10).

‘Farrow sipped his coffee. Watched the dog from the verandah—heeler’s wet nose in the tussocks of grass, tail beating like a metronome. The road beyond was scaled in cinders. The windscreen on the ute smoky, smeared. Good burn. Maybe the last for a while.

Walking down into the yard his strength was revealed—broad shoulders, muscle roped arms, flat knuckled hands, legs thick and strong. Searching the letterbox by the road’s edge he found a piece of mail: watermarked bank logo in the corner, just like all the others they’d sent.’

(*Coffin’s Reach*, early draft)

Although this approach mirrored the prose style of the most revered writer within the evolution, I was ultimately unhappy with the approach. This ‘paranoid, jagged, enervated’ prose style is used in *White Jazz* to create a ‘more convincing cadence’ for his character David Klein (Rich 2009, 16), the extreme approach embodying his fractured personality. This character did not mirror my own, however, so I was in essence forcing Ellroy’s prose onto *Coffin’s Reach* for the sake of the project, rather than letting the content of the novel dictate the style. The problematic nature of this

situation quickly became evident to me, and I knew that something had to be done from a craft perspective.

Disher's *Writing Fiction* contains a passage extremely relevant to this concern. He speaks of how prose must be 'determined by the material', and that the author, through writing and redrafting, must search for the 'correct form...not one that's taught or copied but one that feels true to you' (Disher 2001, 180). To emphasise this point, Disher discusses an author all too relevant to my project:

'But style comes from an author's personality, too. You might admire the narrative fury, hectic energy, moral ambiguity and staccato delivery of James Ellroy's crime fiction, but is it *you*?...

Let another writer's style teach you something that you can then discard or rework until you have your own.'

(Disher 2001, 180)

After reflecting on my first draft, I came to believe that the overly clipped prose style of *White Jazz* would only distract my reader if used for *Coffin's Reach*, as it was not symbiotic with the characters; thus the incongruity between style and content would likely draw attention to the artifice of writing. If the author, along with their style, becomes too obvious, then the line 'separating fiction and reality' will be far too clear, something which is avoided in neon noir (Haut 1999, 2). That is why authors such as Elmore Leonard 'attempt to remain invisible' to the reader so as to 'not distract [them] from the story with obvious writing' (Leonard 2010, 77).

For these reasons, I decided not to emulate any singular neon noir author's style when redrafting *Coffin's Reach*. But instead I took on the general prose advice of Elmore Leonard's *10 Rules for Writing*, which arguably embodies the broad strokes of the neon noir approach.

Perhaps the most important of these rules was the following, and the one that underpins his entire body of work: ‘If it sounds like writing...rewrite it’ (Leonard 2010, 71).

With this in mind, I began to streamline the prose to create an ‘apparent lack of artifice’ (Haut 1999, 2)—in essence, making the prose read as clearly and simply as possible, so as not to distract the reader. This was accomplished by simplifying sentences, removing unnecessary punctuation, and cutting out verbose adjectives and adverbs, all in the effort to give the prose a journalistic tone. Subsequently, the difference between the first and last draft are stark when compared:

‘Farrow crouched down by the arm of the lounge. Shifted his weight. He could see through the dirt-dusted front window—the cracked bitumen road; a lone streetlight casting tenebrous light: shadows on the gum in the front yard. A plastic bag moved in the gutter with the wind. He had switched off every light earlier in the evening. Darkness would give him the advantage tonight.’

(Coffin’s Reach, early draft)

Then, after redrafting:

‘Farrow crouched down by the arm of the lounge. He loaded a shell into the shotgun, then shifted his weight to his haunches to ease the growing ache in his thighs. From this position he could see through the front blinds and out towards the road, the lone streetlight sketching the silhouette of the gum by the bitumen’s edge. The wind picked up for a brief moment and a plastic bag tumbled along the gutter.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 458)

Although the content of each extract is similar, the prose style is vastly different. Furthermore, it could be argued that this new approach, while moving away from my original

intention to emulate the style of Ellroy, ironically embodies his telegraphic style: ‘straight sentences—subject, verb, repetitions with slight modifications’ (Rich 2009, 16). The journalistic qualities of such an approach also echoed one of neon noir’s primary themes: the blurring of fact and fiction.

Implication

With my general prose approach now complete, it was time to consider the more advanced qualities of my telegraphic style—specifically how it could be used to implicate secondary thematic meanings or exposition within the text. As briefly mentioned at the beginning of this sub-chapter, the careful construction of prose allows a writer to craft ‘shifts of emphasis’ that reveal ‘latent information’ for the reader (Disher 2001, 185); put simply, they are using the structure of the prose to implicate something unsaid, without drawing attention to the clear artifice of writing.

These shifts of emphasis are often supported by dialogue, and how it differs to the internal thoughts of the character. Much like how the original hard-boiled character is ‘paradoxically’ defined by a series of dichotomies (Calweti 1976, 149), dialogue in both hard-boiled and neon noir often stands at an opposite to the expositional prose—in essence creating a binary. And through this binary a number of elements of characterisation and theme can be reinforced to the reader.

hard-boiled

Although this sub-chapter has stressed the accessibility and simplicity of the traditional hard-boiled prose style, it should be noted that not all hard-boiled writers avoided more artistic approaches to their craft. For example, despite still embracing a surface simplicity of syntax and vocabulary (Smith 2010, 134), Raymond Chandler’s work is filled with deftly handled

‘shifts of emphasis’ within the prose (Disher 2001, 18). This is because Chandler, over the course of his many novels, ‘developed a real mastery, markedly better than Hammett’s, in varying the pace and intensity’ (Knight 2004, 120). It is these moments of modulated pace that draw the reader, oftentimes unconsciously, to particular attributes of the reoccurring protagonist Phillip Marlowe:

‘I didn’t get a chance to look at the garage. The doors were shut and padlocked and something moved behind the hedge as I drew level. A woman in a green and white check coat and a small button of a hat on soft blonde hair stepped out of the maze and stood looking wild-eyed at my car, as if she hadn’t heard it come up the hill. Then she turned swiftly and dodged back out of sight. It was Carmen Sternwood, of course.’

(Chandler 2011, 68-9)

This seemingly innocuous scene gives a subtle display of Chandler’s skill in creating shifts of emphasis. Although the first two sentences of the paragraph feature a declarative terseness reminiscent of the general hard-boiled style, the third sentence suddenly breaks the pattern, becoming more languid with a number of conjunctions. Traditionally, ‘longer, slower, more complex sentences can convey an atmosphere of contemplation...or regret and sadness’ (Disher 2001, 184), and this shift tells us much about Chandler and his troublesome relationship with his client-by-proxy Carmen Sternwood. Such a technique may appear elementary upon consideration, but the subtle nature of its usage is only a testament to Chandler’s skill.

These shifts of emphasis can also be found in Chandler’s acerbic similes ‘that only Chaucer has matched for point and punch’ (Knight 2004, 120); for example, ‘old men with faces like lost battles’ (Chandler 1988, 60) in *The High Window* (1942). These moments of poetic description undeniably modulate the prose, albeit perhaps more overtly than

Chandler's other approach. Regardless, the clear divergence from the traditionally straightforward descriptive prose is perhaps why such similes have become so strongly associated with the hard-boiled style; in fact, they are even the subject of parody in hard-boiled spoof novels such as *The Big Enchilda* by L.A. Morse (1982).

Whatever the method, this shift of emphasis within the prose can almost be seen as a side-effect of a second-voice within Chandler's work, a phenomenon Knight describes as Marlowe's 'two forms of dialogue': Marlowe to ordinary people and Marlowe, 'far more eloquent, to himself and the reader' (Knight 2004, 120-1). This distinction of voice becomes evident when one compares the internal voice of Marlowe, one that is dominated by the aforementioned languid moments of reflection and similes, against his verbal exchanges.

Dialogue within early hard-boiled, much like the descriptive prose itself, was often based on reality, using slang and terms prominent during the time of production. Almost like the hyper-realised cowboys of early North American frontier fiction, hard-boiled protagonists speak, when they speak at all, in 'the tough, laconic American vernacular' (Scaggs 2007, 57). As identified by Chandler himself, this language is 'the kind of lingo' found on the 'mean streets', and was not only understood by the early hard-boiled reading audience, but it was also how 'they imagined they spoke themselves' (Scaggs 2007, 57).

'I reached out and grabbed the lapels of his coat. 'And something more, pal. I want you to hear every word I say. I want you to tell it to everyone you know. And when you tell it, tell it strong, because I mean every word of it. There are ten thousand mugs that hate me and you know it. They hate me because if they mess with me I shoot their damn heads off. I've done it and I'll do it again.'

(Spillane 2006, 7)

Beyond capturing the somewhat romanticised language of the streets, the bluntness of this hard-boiled language can again be attributed to the hurried production methods of the pulp-

fiction industry. Much like with hard-boiled prose, however, the ever astute stylist Chandler gives readers a much more literary approach to the form, his fast paced and witty exchanges emphasising the duality of Marlowe:

‘I grinned at her with my head on one side. She flushed. Her hot black eyes looked mad. ‘I don’t see what there is to be cagey about,’ she snapped. ‘And I don’t like your manners.’

‘I’m not crazy about yours,’ I said. ‘I didn’t ask to see you. You sent for me. I don’t mind you ritzing me or drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don’t mind your showing me your legs. They’re swell legs and it’s a pleasure to make their acquaintance. I don’t mind if you don’t like my manners. They’re pretty bad. I grieve over them during the long winter evenings. But don’t waste your time trying to cross-examine me.’”

(Chandler 2011, 18)

The sentence structure and word choice of this extract are simple, often employing slang terms that may seem anachronistic to a modern reader but were very much of the time—‘cagey’, ‘ritzing’, ‘swell’. Despite this simplicity, Marlowe himself exudes a dry, almost self-aware wit. This humorous undercurrent does not betray the expected tough laconicism of hard-boiled dialogue, however, as evidenced by Carmen Sternwood’s reaction to Marlowe’s words: ‘People don’t talk like that to me...My God, you big dark handsome brute! I ought to throw a Buick at you’ (Chandler 2011, 18-9). Furthermore, one only has to compare such an exchange to a few notable scenes of observation in the novel to see how this dialogical persona of Marlowe is far from his true isolated self:

‘Rain filled the gutters and splashed knee-high off the pavement. Big cops in slickers that shone like gun barrels had a lot of fun carrying giggling girls across the bad places. The rain drummed hard on the roof of the car and the burbank top began to leak. A pool of water formed on the floorboards for me to keep my feet

in. It was too early in the fall for that kind of rain. I struggled into a trench coat and made a dash for the nearest drugstore and bought myself a pint of whisky. Back in the car I used enough of it to keep warm and interested. I was long overparked, but the cops were too busy carrying girls and blowing whistles to bother about that.'

(Chandler 2011, 32)

This duality of voice isn't strictly limited to Chandler's work, however, and can be found in Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*. Interestingly, the two voice dynamic in this book is a reverse of Marlowe. Deputy Sheriff Lou Ford, the protagonist and killer of the title, speaks in a calm manner that betrays his terse and violent inner voice.

'The waitress, a new girl from Dallas, watched as I buttoned my coat. 'Why, you don't even carry a gun!' she said, as though she was giving me a piece of news.

'No,' I smiled. 'No gun, no blackjack, nothing like that. Why should I?'

'But you're a cop—a deputy sheriff, I mean. What if some crook should try to shoot you?'

'We don't have many crooks here in Central City, ma'am,' I said. Anyway, people are people, even when they're a little misguided. You don't hurt them, they won't hurt you. They'll listen to reason.'

(Thompson 2010, 1)

And then later:

'I slammed on my hat and started for the door. She got in front of me, blocking the way.

'You lousy son-of-a-bitch. You—'

'Don't you call me that,' I said. 'Don't do it, ma'am.'

'I did call you that! And I'll do it again! You're a son-of-a-bitch, bastard, pimp...'

I tried to push past her. I had to get out of there. I knew what was going to happen if I didn't get out, and I knew I couldn't let it happen. I might kill her. It might bring *the sickness* back. And even if I didn't and it didn't, I'd be washed up. She'd talk. She'd yell her head off. And people would start thinking, thinking and wondering about that time fifteen years ago.'

(Thompson 2010, 8)

Although hardly languid or literary, Ford's dialogue remains calm and measured, his dialogue never marked with an exclamation mark. He even remains polite in the face of insult, asking a prostitute not to swear at him, calling her 'ma'am' the whole time. As soon as the view shifts into his internal thought, however, the sentence structure becomes shorter, sharper, and more violent in its brusqueness. In fact, it almost takes on the form of Spillane's avenging monologue from *I, the Jury*—where he laments the death of his best friend—which was discussed earlier in this sub-chapter.

This duality of voice can be linked to the 'tension between the two sides of [Ford's] personality', a division fostered by his father who encouraged him to 'hide his abnormality' as a child (Horsley 2005, 131). This is because, as already discussed in Part One, the hard-boiled protagonist is a 'fundamentally divided figure'; each voice 'reveals a side to the private eye that is incompatible with the other' (Scaggs 2007, 61), and this incompatibility often defines the isolation and turbulence at the heart of the character—a trait reflected in the careful construction of prose.

neon noir

As with a number of hard-boiled elements, these shifts of emphasis continue into neon noir, and similarly implicate elements of characterisation to the reader. This can be seen even in texts as telegraphically extreme as James Ellroy's *White Jazz*, albeit in a fashion that is simultaneously more and less obvious than in the work of Chandler.

Throughout the novel, sections of prose will often shift into an italicised font, indicating the character has taken drugs—whether it be heroin, uppers, downers, etc. This shift, while visually obvious, also brings with it a subtle modulation in sentence structure:

‘The will to remember.

Fever dreams—that time burning.

Old now—a gringo exile rich off real estate. My confession complete—but still not enough...

I’m going back. I’m going to make Exley confess every monstrous deal he ever cut with the same candor I have. I’m going to kill Carlisle, and make Dudley fill in every moment of his life—to eclipse my guilt with the sheer weight of his evil.

I’m going to kill him in the name of our victims, find Glenda and say:

Tell me anything.

Tell me everything.

Revoke our time apart.

Love me in fierce danger.’

(Ellroy 1993, 359)

Although the short, sharp sentences still remain, we begin to see longer, more languid moments within this same extract: ‘I’m going to make Exley confess every monstrous deal he ever cut with the same candour I have’ (Ellroy 1993, 359). The subject matter also becomes more contemplative, with Klein showing emotion and beginning to question his actions throughout the narrative. This stands stark against the often linear, action driven prose that dominates the remainder of the novel, and indicates that Klein, much like Marlowe, is a man of duality: he is both drug addict and law enforcer, mob killer and lover.

This dichotomy of character can be found in a number of other neon noir texts, and is often emphasised through a contrast of dialogue and internal thought—an approach that mirrors Chandler’s work. Much like the sub-genre from which it evolved, neon noir employs the language of the streets. The verisimilitude of this language, however, is arguably far more

realistic than in the *Black Mask* inspired form. This is because a large portion of previous hard-boiled work offered ‘amorphous depictions’ of real world living that, no matter how evocative, were ultimately ‘parodies of the culture’ (Haut 1999, 2). Neon noir, on the other hand, is often ‘seeking to replicate life at a street level’ (Haut 1999, 2). Subsequently, caustic and often shocking exchanges of dialogue can propel a neon noir story:

‘You said his clothing was disarrayed. How?’

‘His shirttail was out of his pants. His belt was fastened, but his pants were unbuttoned and unzipped and his thing was hanging out.’

‘His penis?’

‘Right, his penis.’

‘Was he exposing himself deliberately?’

‘Well, it was hanging right out. He must of known about it.’

‘But he wasn’t handling himself or thrusting out with his hips or anything like that.’

‘No.’

‘Did he have an erection?’

‘I didn’t notice.’

‘You saw his cock and didn’t notice if he had a hard-on or not?’

He flushed again. ‘He didn’t have one.’

(Block 2001, 50-1)

In this exchange from Lawrence Block’s *The Sins of the Father*, we can see ex-cop cum private investigator Matthew Scudder interviewing a witness. Continuing the tradition founded by *Black Mask*, Scudder speaks with the language of the street, and is unashamed to use such words. The structure of the exchange, however, is far more realistic than the evolution’s hard-boiled forbearers; characters skirt a topic, repeat themselves, and clarify meaning. In this way, the extract almost replicates a transcript of a real conversation, the author choosing not to refine or restructure for the sake of clarity and conciseness.

The rambling dialogue stands at an opposite to the internal prose of Scudder, however, which is declarative and assured:

'I got off the BMT at Sixty-second Street and New Utrecht and walked a couple of blocks through a part of Brooklyn where Bay Ridge and Bensonhurst rub shoulders with one another. A powdery rain was melting some of yesterday's snow. The weather bureau expected it to freeze sometime during the night. I was a little early and stopped at a drugstore lunch counter for a cup of coffee. Towards the rear of the counter a kid was demonstrating a gravity knife to a couple of his friends. He took a quick look at me and made the knife disappear, reminding me once again that I haven't stopped looking like a cop.'

(Block 2001, 91)

In this extract it is almost as if Scudder, a rampant alcoholic, is attempting to reign in his thoughts; like a drunk trying to walk in a straight line, each action, memory, and observation is laid bare in a simplistic yet considered manner, one careful step after the next. The oppositional nature of this external and internal prose implicates Scudder's duality to the reader, both as stumblebum and haunted cop.

Scudder's incisive and realistically blunt dialogue is a side effect of having worked a street beat as a younger man, his average investigative method defined by 'conversational gambits' (Haut 1999, 84). This is not the true Scudder, however, as his internal voice is far more austere and 'confessional' (Haut 1999, 85), almost like a sinner seeking atonement for his past actions—an idea solidified by his tendency to light candles 'in various churches, before placing a percentage of his earnings in the coffers' (Haut 1999, 8). By highlighting the disparity between the public and private self, Block emphasises the traumatic struggle of the character almost subconsciously for the reader, all through shifts of emphasis between dialogue and action.

australia

Shifts of emphasis also appear in a number of Australian novels with neon noir influences—albeit not always in the same fashion as their North American counterparts. For example, in Peter Temple’s *An Iron Rose* the first half of the novel is written in a terse, fragmented style:

‘In the passage, Drizabone off the hook, straight out the door. Didn’t need to dress. I’d fallen asleep in a cracked leather armchair, fully clothed, half-eaten pie on the arm, television on.

I didn’t see the dog but I heard him land on the tray. Little thump. Short route through Quinn’s Marsh, saved a few minutes by bumping open the gate with the roobars and putting the old Land Rover across the sheep paddock behind Ned Lowey’s house. You could see the house from a long way off: all the lights were on.’

(Temple 2013, 1-2)

The approach slowly fades, however, over the course of the story into something far more traditional, eventually echoing the first-person hard-boiled style of Temple’s previous Irish novels:

‘I was in the smithy getting ready to temper a knife blade when Detective Michael Shea drove up, again without Cotter. He came in and sat on the bench.

I had a thick iron plate on the fire, just about ready, almost red...

It was red enough. I took the tongs and moved it to the cooler side of the fire, picked up the knife blade and put it on the plate. The important thing now was to quench the blade when it showed the right colour.’

(Temple 2013, 258)

Through such an approach, *An Iron Rose* does technically present a shift of emphasis, but it is wholly encompassing; rather than appearing within a paragraph, the entire novel constitutes a modulation. Over the course of the story, the prose style mirrors the protagonist’s movement

from a reserved, broken man into something far more fluid and open. Although it could be argued that such a usage creates a greater connection between style and character, this more expansive approach to the technique ultimately removes the clear dichotomy of voice offered by a more restrained and frequent shift of emphasis. This is undoubtedly a valid approach to the technique, but not typical within the neon noir evolution.

Temple's later book *The Broken Shore*, however, does offer a more traditional approach to this shift of emphasis, which is interesting when one realises that the book is essentially a loose retelling of *An Iron Rose*. In fact, Stephen Knight notes that 'remarkably, a novel synopsis works for both' (Knight 2011, 76). Despite such story similarities, *The Broken Shore*, embraces a clear disparity between descriptive prose and dialogue that, much like Block's Scudder novels before it, is created through subtle shifts of emphasis.

The dialogue of protagonist Joe Cashin in *The Broken Shore* is often short, sharp, and straight to the point:

'She pouted, eye-flick to Morris, produced another card, school ID with a photograph: Stacey-Ann Gettigan.

'Fourteen, Stacey,' [Cashin] said. 'In the back of a van with a grown man.'

'Just waggin,' she said. She folded her arms under her breasts. 'Not a crime.'

'What do you reckon, Allan?' Cashin said. 'Crime to be jumping a fourteen-year-old in your van?'

'Just kissin and that,' said Morris.

'Take your pants off to kiss? Kissing with your bum? You married, Allan?'

(Temple 2007, 56)

An element of colloquial humour does exist beneath the brusque exchanges—'Take your pants off to kiss? Kissing with your bum?'—but this is ostensibly the vernacular of the average Australian. Thus, if one wishes to employ the language of the Australian streets, moments of slang must be employed.

Regardless of the verisimilitude of *The Broken Shore's* dialogue, it stands in direct contrast to the descriptive prose, which is, while clipped, far more languid than Temple's anterior work, the sentences luxuriating in the spartan landscape of the Victorian coastline:

'Cashin walked around the hill, into the wind from the sea. It was cold, late autumn, last glowing leaves clinging to the liquidambars and maples his great-grandfather's brother had planted, their surrender close. He loved this time, the morning stillness, loved it more than spring.'

(Temple 2007, 5)

For broken cop Cashin, the landscape of *The Broken Shore* takes on an almost mystical quality, the 'longer, slower' sections of prose conveying a sense of 'regret...sadness' (Disher 2001, 184). In this way, the prose embodies 'the underlying mythical idea that the landscape embodies lasting values. The shore may be broken, but its grandeur and the surf that attacks it re-enact the dialectical vitality of life, suffering, belief, and literature—to speak as Cashin can feel and think' (Knight 2011, 77). This more languid approach to descriptive prose, while creating a duality between an internal and external voice, arguably positions *The Broken Shore* as something far more akin to the 'traditional reflective arty novel' than a localised version of neon noir (Knight 2011, 77).

This approach arguably continues into David Whish-Wilson's *Line of Sight* and *Zero to the Bone*, where we often encounter descriptive and 'reflective arty' prose akin to the traditional literary novel—albeit couched in brief glimpses of more terse neon noir descriptions and action:

'It was an hour past sunset and North Cottesloe Beach was deserted. The moon was rising over the roofline of the Ocean Beach Hotel. The water was colder

than he'd expected, and Swann breathed heavily as he stepped into the wash. The sea breeze had dropped and the swell emerged glassy and sheer out of the darkness. There wasn't much traffic on Eric Street, and between the waves Swann could hear the clink of pool balls in the back bar, the odd shout and laugh coming across the water. He swam through the sets that broke over the reef on either side of him, rifling along the hard skeins of beach behind. His breathing had settled, and his skin tingled with the cold, diving down into the darkness and watching the glow on his fingertips as he kicked to the deeper banks of even colder water, the faint suck of swell over his back and shoulders, then closing his eyes and letting go, the air in his lungs drawing him up.'

(Whish-Wilson 2010, 51)

Although moments such as this undoubtedly provide a contrast—perhaps even a second voice—to the more restrained and taut moments of prose, they occur regularly throughout both of Whish-Wilson's Swann novels. While undoubtedly masterful, these sections raise some concerns regarding neon noir prose. As Leonard himself says: 'Don't go into great detail describing places and things...even if you're good at it, you don't want descriptions that bring the action, the flow of the story to a standstill' (Leonard 2005, 55).

coffin's reach

As already mentioned earlier in this sub-chapter, the prose style employed within *Coffin's Reach* changed drastically between drafts. This change, while allowing me to address wider expectations of the neon noir form, also provided an opportunity for the implementation of additional craft approaches. Specifically, I was able to employ subtle shifts of emphasis within the writing to reinforce certain themes and elements of characterisation.

One of my goals when writing *Coffin's Reach* was to try and capture the iconic Australian vernacular in the dialogue of my characters, both in regards to structure and content, so as to emphasise the localisation:

‘What do you reckon, dickhead?’ Royce said.

McIntyre sat down. He bit into his cold pie, the flaking pastry like dandruff on the desktop. ‘Too good for the floor, are we?’ he said, mouth full.

The not-so-fresh-faced guy looked at the cement beneath his feet. It was stained by years of piss, blood, and other bodily fluids. ‘Not sitting on that mess.’

‘Why?’ McIntyre said. ‘Bit too hard for your delicate arse? Maybe when your boyfriend wakes up, he can toughen you up.’

‘Fuck you,’ the not-so-fresh faced guy said. ‘Ain’t no poof. Come in here and I’ll fucking knock you on your arse.’

McIntyre stared him down. ‘Don’t push me, Mick.’

The guy backed away from the bars. ‘

(Coffin’s Reach, 235-6)

In the earliest drafts of the novel, I believe the brusque and often clipped nature of such dialogue was lost, however, due to the Ellroy-esque descriptive prose employed at the time of writing:

‘Nicole moving through the yard, up towards the house. Swollen clouds covering the sun above—her shadow shrinking in the shifting light. Norm was picking a toe-nail with a flick knife. But he stopped when he saw Nicole slowly approaching the verandah...

Next door the dog sat in the shade of the carport. Her father would park his ute in there upon arriving home: that was hours from now.

‘You’ve lived here awhile now, haven’t you?’ she asked.

Norm nodded. ‘Whole life.’

‘So you know most of the people living here?’

‘Of course,’ Norm said. ‘Why you asking?’

Nicole picked at the balustrade and a sliver of paint peeled up from the wood and lodged itself beneath her nail, biting the flesh.’

(Coffin’s Reach, early draft)

By crafting prose that is similar in construction to dialogue, I was limiting my ability to create a disparity between the internal and external voice of my protagonists. It was also difficult to modulate the prose, as every shift of emphasis was extremely overt—arguably drawing attention to the artifice at hand. This can be seen most obviously in the last line of the extract, which becomes far more languid and symbolic. By reworking the prose style in subsequent drafts, however, a subtle difference between dialogue and descriptive prose was possible, creating a binary of voice:

‘She made her way up past Norm’s tow-truck, and towards the verandah. He was sitting on the wicker chair overlooking the yard, picking at his big toe with a flick knife. But he quickly stopped when he saw the girl watching him...

The dog whined next door, circled after his own tail, and then settled again in the shade of the carport. A lone fly treaded the damp fur beneath his eyes.

‘You’ve lived here a long time, haven’t you?’

Norm nodded. ‘Whole life.’

‘So you’d know most people in the Well?’

‘Course,’ Norm said. ‘Why you asking?’

Nicole picked at the sliver of peeling paint on the balustrade...’

(Coffin’s Reach, 290-1)

By moving towards longer, less fragmented telegraphic sentences, a clear disparity between prose and dialogue was created. While dialogue is near always short and sharp, descriptive prose has the opportunity to be slightly more languid without distracting the reader, or drawing attention to the writing. This conscious craft decision allowed me to emphasise the disparity between the internal and external voice of the protagonists. In short, I was able to craft situations where the dialogical interactions of the character did not always coalesce with their thoughts, and in this way necessary elements of characterisation were emphasised subconsciously to the reader—particularly isolation.

For example, much like Scudder in the Lawrence Block novels, Royce was written to speak the language of the streets; or, in this case, the Well. He often verbally spars with locals, relying on ‘conversational gambits’ and colloquial language to push his investigation (Haut 1999, 84):

‘Royce sat down next to a miller propped up on the bar, the man nursing his bitter dregs to avoid the heat outside. ‘Actually,’ Royce said. ‘I’m looking for some smokes.’

‘Ask someone else, mate. Gave up years ago. Doctor’s orders.’

Royce picked up a packet off the counter. He tossed them to the man underhand.

‘Where do you keep them?’ Royce asked. ‘Out back? Under the taps?’

The publican rubbed his freckled neck with a hand. ‘No idea what you’re talking about.’

‘Don’t bullshit me, mate. You getting booze under the table too? Maybe keeping the difference? Might have to have a chat with the owner about it all. See what he thinks. Maybe he can pick you up from the station.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 373)

Such exchanges are not indicative of the true Royce, however. Although he is often harsh in his verbal interactions, his internal thoughts were crafted to be far more poetic and contemplative, a state which mirrors the ‘confessional’ nature of Block’s reoccurring private investigator:

‘Anna came back into the kitchen. She sat down at the table with Shaun on her lap, and began to jostle him on her knee, trying to calm him. Royce knew the toddler’s features echoed his own, enough people had told him so. But he saw none of himself in his son’s face, or in the way he moved, and he often wondered if his own father had thought the same thing about him.’

(Coffin’s Reach, 219-20)

From a craft perspective, this extract from Royce's story includes sentences far more languid than any dialogue in *Coffin's Reach*, particularly the last sentence which was written to create a sense of 'regret or sadness' (Disher 2001, 184). The word choice is also far less colloquial than most of the dialogical interactions, which gives the reader a sense that perhaps the external Royce is not the true Royce, and maybe he is unable to fully express himself due to his isolated state.

This dichotomy of internal and external voice, while most obvious in Royce, also appears in both Farrow and Nicole. While Farrow exudes an almost mechanical rigidity in his everyday interactions—when relaxing he is even described as 'a machine turning down after a loss of power' (*Coffin's Reach*, 485)—his internal self is intentionally far more reflective, his thoughts often dominated by memory or regret:

'Molly used to look after all of this—the cooking, the cleaning. But after she left, what else could Farrow do? He should've known it was coming though. A year ago now she had tried to take Nicole and leave him for the first time, back when the shifts first started dropping at the mill...Farrow laid it out for her. He would never let her take the girl from him, not after everything he had given up in Brisbane. And for a while that was enough to keep Molly in the Well. But even then Farrow knew it was nothing but borrowed time.'

(*Coffin's Reach*, 222)

Again, these sections of prose stand stark against the dialogical interactions of the character, as Farrow was intentionally written to say very little at all—his every utterance short, sharp—to emphasise his isolation.

Similarly, much like her Father, Nicole speaks rarely, characters such as Mariah even noting her silence: 'Don't really say much, do you?' (*Coffin's Reach*, 270). This lack of dialogical interaction can be linked to Nicole's fear of human interaction, and her subsequent

consideration of every conversation, an approach that leaves her dialogue stilted and almost always declarative.

‘The man wiped a blood-slicked hand on his overalls. With the steel-toe of his boot, he pushed the stew pot towards the heart of the fire, then kicked the coals closer, ensconcing the curved iron.

‘People call me Bishop,’ he said.

The girl thought over what she was going to say. She didn’t know much about the man, and didn’t want to say the wrong thing. ‘Is that your first name? Or your last?’

‘Does it matter?’

(Coffin’s Reach, 313)

Compared to Nicole’s dialogical voice, her internal thoughts, however, are far less constructed—or, as she describes them, ‘scattershot’ (*Coffin’s Reach, 495*):

‘Nicole thought of Bishop and the shack. That night, after she had eaten the wallaby stew, she had struggled to sleep. When she closed her eyes, she couldn’t help but imagine him out there among the trees and dark hills. He was alone in this world—his mother somewhere unknown. Did he still think about her? Did he wake in the night and feel a pain in his chest that wouldn’t go away? Almost as if an ember was lodged in his throat, slowly burning its way through him?’

(Coffin’s Reach, 331)

It is clear through comparison that a duality of voice exists for Nicole, as it does for both Royce and Farrow. This duality, created through subtle shifts of emphasis and prose construction, allowed me to implicate much to the reader about the characterisation of each protagonist, while embracing a style of writing free from overt literary artifice—in essence contributing to the blurring of fictional prose and journalistic reporting; fact and fiction.

Findings

In regards to prose, it seems that many Australian authors with neon noir influences are hesitant to embrace the telegraphic bluntness of the style, while those who do are often directly emulating a North American writer—for example, Dave Warner and his appropriation of Ellroy’s distinct approach. Many authors, such as David Whish-Wilson and Peter Temple, while undoubtedly skilled, produce prose that verges on impressionistic or a ‘traditional reflective arty novel’ (Knight 2011, 77), and it would seem that this more literary approach is undertaken in an effort to distance the works from the pulp lineage of the evolution. While this approach is completely valid, it does betray the prose expectations of a sub-genre that is often defined by its distinct lack of artifice.

As covered by the research and discussion within this sub-chapter, the prose of *Coffin’s Reach* went through a number of changes, all of them with the intention of limiting my presence within the style; to appropriate Elmore Leonard: if it sounded like writing, I rewrote it (Leonard 2005, 71). This process not only emphasised the style expectations of the evolution, but also brought out through contrast the distinct local qualities of the dialogue, reinforcing the dichotomy of the featured characters.

Furthermore, it allowed me to embrace a pared-back journalistic style that embodies the evolution’s tendency to blur fact and fiction, the novel’s prose colouring the narrative as ‘quasi-anthropological’ (Haut 1999, 3). As previously discussed in Part Two, this tone is reminiscent of real world journalistic texts analysing historical corruption in Queensland, and thus the line between fact and fiction is blurred—the examination of fictional crime ultimately becoming a means of ‘analysing society’ at large (Haut 1993, 3).

CHAPTER THREE

Pulling the Trigger

'All I have is the will to remember. Time revoked/fever dreams—I wake up reaching, afraid I'll forget.'

— James Ellroy, *White Jazz*

'Now I fold you down, my drunkard, my navigator, my first lost keeper, to love and look at later.'

— Anne Sexton, *All My Pretty Ones*

Part One Conclusion

As discussed throughout this project, Australian crime writers rarely embrace the distinct qualities of neon noir. Authors such as Peter Temple, Garry Disher, and David Wish-Wilson do incorporate select elements of the evolution within their work, but often in a manner that negates other neon noir expectations. Characters, while violent, are softer than their North American counterparts, often evoking the larrikin. The setting, while sometimes iconically Australian, lacks the expected symbolism of neon noir. Narratives, although built around numerous characters, rarely embrace the critical opportunities of a discursive panoply. And the prose, while often impressive and masterfully written, eschews the artifice-free, journalistic approach that defines a vast number of prominent novels within the evolution.

Perhaps as a culture we are simply slow to fully adopt outside literary trends. Our first localisation of the hard-boiled form, Peter Corris' *The Dying Trade*, came out nearly six decades after the emergence and rise to popularity of the sub-genre in North America. Similarly, if a localised version of neon noir were to emerge this year, it too would be appearing nearly six decades after Richard Stark's *The Hunter*. Within the context of this project, I situate *Coffin's Reach* as this emerging text—an Australian crime novel that has consciously adapted the evolution into a local setting. In this way it is not an entirely new sub-genre, nor is it a pastiche; instead, like Corris' novel was a local version of hard-boiled, *Coffin's Reach* is a local iteration of neon noir.

Through the writing and research process of this project, the possibilities of a localised neon noir novel have been explored, and certain location specific considerations have been made clear. When developing an Australian neon noir protagonist, it is important to balance the violent characterisation typically associated with the evolution alongside the familiar archetypes of the nation, specifically the larrikin. Through my research and writing I

ruminated on a number of ways to address such concerns: firstly, characters may be violent, but perhaps only against those who deserve such damage. Secondly, protagonists can be isolated and emotionally distant, but the circumstances surrounding this isolation will ideally elicit sympathy from a reader. Finally, I decided to surround my protagonists with a number of secondary characters that fulfil the expectations of the traditional larrikin. In this way, such an undeniably Australian figure can still feature within the landscape of the novel without eliminating any expected neon noir attributes of the protagonist.

In regards to point of view, neon noir authors can use either first or third-person. If one wishes to emphasise a disparity between the reader and characters, however, third-person is ideal. Such an approach not only creates a moral ambiguity, but it also gives the work a ‘vicarious and voyeuristic’ or ‘quasi-anthropological’ tone, almost as if scenes were a chapter in a ‘survivalist’s handbook’ or perhaps even stylised non-fiction (Haut 1993, 3). This approach is thematically relevant to a novel like *Coffin’s Reach*, as the historical corruption in Queensland was revealed not by police or any other investigating body, but by journalists such as Chris Masters and Phil Dickie. In this way, the line between fact and fiction is blurred, and the examination of fictional crime ultimately becomes a means of analysing culture at large.

Similarly, a number of narrative structures occur within neon noir. However, to capture a panopticon of crime and corruption, particularly when it spans an entire state like it did in Queensland during the 1980s, a multi-perspective discursive narrative is arguably needed. Furthermore, including real world characters and events only further blurs the line between fact and fiction. In this way, a text like *Coffin’s Reach* may still obey the ‘inner workings of the genre’ (Haut 1999, 11), but it offers a latent exploration of the politics, history, and culture of its setting.

This setting should also symbolically represent isolation and menace, while being distinct to Australia. Within the context of *Coffin's Reach*, the selection of a rural Queensland setting—slowly dying due to corruption, expansion, and greed—allows me to examine symbolism relevant to the content, and to neon noir as a sub-genre; specifically I can analyse a ‘culture driven to extremes by the era’s cut-throat economics...social inequality [and] violent crime’ (Haut 1999, 5). The sheer expanse of this corruption, and its distinctly Australian nature, can furthermore be emphasised through a surfeit of local signifiers.

Finally, the prose should be crafted in a way that does not distract the reader, lest the artifice of writing be clear. In the context of *Coffin's Reach*, this led me to develop a pared back journalistic style that not only emphasised the distinct local qualities of the dialogue, but also created a tone reminiscent of a historical document or piece of journalism, contributing to the novel’s ‘quasi-anthropological’ qualities (Haut 1999, 3).

The process of creating a novel is difficult. Emerging from the often-unidentifiable miasma of creative thought, the final product is wrought through research, experimentation, and reflection. This process, while often disheartening, is how one develops their own craft. The author builds upon their previous successes and failures, and in this way a work just completed becomes a stepping-stone for the next. Disher addresses this process in his book *Writing Fiction*:

‘We improve as we go along, partly by listening to expert advice but mostly by learning from our mistakes and developing the critical eye that tells us when we are not writing well. Bit by bit, we realise that we *can* improve, then that we *have* improved. We know more. We’re prepared to take risks and test ourselves. And so we improve still further, and so we’re rewarded.’

(Disher 2001, 210)

While undoubtedly true in regards to the process of writing *Coffin's Reach*, I believe this concept can be applied to the project as a whole. The work discussed throughout, both research and fictional, is ultimately a stepping-stone, for myself and hopefully others, to explore and analyse the possibilities of neon noir in an Australian setting, *Coffin's Reach*—and the associated exegetical—acting as a foundation of a much wider cannon.

As discussed in the opening of this project, many Australian citizens struggle to engage with cultural and political issues. Neon noir, in its infancy, emerged from similar circumstances, helping its readership 'articulate public concern' (Haut 1999, 14). Through the successes of this project, and my future neon noir work, I am discussing the personal and social effects of history, crime, and corruption in an Australian setting; and hope to inspire others to do the same. By tackling these subjects in a neon noir manner, they are being brought to the attention of a readership that may otherwise not engage with such content. As Haut himself says, 'To examine a culture, one need only investigate its crimes. Thus the fictionalisation of crime has become a favourite pastime and means of analysing society' (Haut 1999, 3).

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CHAPTER FOUR

Coffin's Reach

'It has been said, and not entirely in jest, that Sydney is the most corrupt city in the western world, except of course for Newark, New Jersey and Brisbane, Queensland.'

— Evan Whitton, *Can of Worms*

'Criminals do not die by the hands of the law. They die by the hands of other men.'

— George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

1985

I

They were headed back to base when Royce spotted the car, a beat-up hatchback down in the scrub skirting the road, cracked taillights flaring in the darkness like dying embers. He pointed it out to Eddie and the Sergeant dropped the LandCruiser down to second gear.

‘Get many joyrides?’ Royce asked.

Eddie shook his head. ‘Kids might lift some tyres. But not the whole car.’

From their position at the top of the embankment, Royce could see down into the rear window of the abandoned vehicle. There was movement in the backseat, an upright silhouette, maybe nothing more than a trick of the light.

‘What do you think?’ Royce asked.

Eddie scratched his greying beard. He seemed to be wondering if it was worth the paperwork. ‘All right,’ he said.

He brought the LandCruiser around in a u-turn, and pulled up short by the embankment’s edge, tyres slewing on the loose dirt of the shoulder.

Royce dropped down from the passenger step, shivering. His shirt billowed around his wiry frame. Summer was only two weeks away now, but the wind coming down from the foothills still carried a winter chill, along with the faint scent of smoke. In the darkness

beyond the LandCruiser's headlights, Royce could see a strip of flame quivering on the horizon. Soon the days would be growing hotter and longer, and the farmers had to burn the cane while the good weather remained.

Eddie switched on the roof light to warn oncoming drivers. He joined Royce outside and passed him a torch. 'After you.'

Royce kicked up grit as he slid down the angled dirt. At the bottom of the incline, he patted the dust from his uniform, then checked his revolver was still secure in the holster. He heard the LandCruiser's suspension groaning above him and he turned to see Eddie watching him from up top. The man's heavy frame was resting against the bullbar.

'You coming down?' Royce asked.

Eddie tapped the chevrons on his shoulder. 'Done my time, mate.'

He was still laughing as Royce turned on the torch and crept closer to the hatchback. Footprints ran through the dirt by his feet, following the gravel ditch that ran parallel with the road, and the indentations were big. Heavy soled-work boots or something similar. Royce followed them with the torch beam and they grew fainter and fainter until they disappeared completely into the dark. Somewhere nearby a curlew began to wail from the scrub, the sound pained, lonely. Royce withdrew his revolver. He tried to remember what his old man taught him—steady yourself, stay calm and count each breath.

Through the rear windscreen he checked the interior. Two suitcases were piled on the seat and a dress hung from the grab handle above, twisting in the breeze coming through an open window. It was the silhouette he could see from the road.

Eddie called out from up top. 'Mate, it looks like a ditcher. We'll write her up tomorrow.'

Drawing closer to the front of the hatchback, Royce saw the driver's side window was smashed. He leant inside to scan the console, careful not to cut himself on the jagged shards

still lodged in the sill. The engine ticked loudly beneath the stoved bonnet. It took him a moment to understand what he was seeing. There were blotches on the steering wheel and seat, dark stains along the driver's side floor.

'You all right?' Eddie said.

He looked up at him. 'There's blood.'

The Sergeant shook his head. 'Fucking hell.'

Royce watched him disappear from the lip of the embankment. The crack and hiss of the LandCruiser's VHF broke the morning silence.

Royce returned his weapon to its holster. It was all muscle memory now, no thought required. They had hammered it into him at the academy, the same thing over and over again until it was part of you, until it was something inescapable. He felt the weight of his wedding ring on his hand and thought of Anna at home, and what she would say to him when he told her what they found. Two words formed in the back of his mind when he thought of the blood in the car. Two words: not again.

Royce exhaled heavily, and his breath was the only warmth in the morning darkness.

Farrow leant his weight against the balustrade of the verandah. He sipped his coffee and watched the heeler roam the yard, wet nose probing the tussocks of grass, tail beating the air like a metronome. Fallen ash scaled the ground beneath the animal's paws and the flakes had powdered his legs a dark grey.

Good burn last night. Maybe the last for a long while.

As Farrow tramped down the front steps of the house, he stretched his sore hands and popped his knuckles, the joints flat from years of fighting. Cool mornings like this always left him aching, the countless bruises and broken bones still lingering.

In the letterbox by the road's edge he found a single piece of mail—bank watermark printed in the corner, just like all the others they had sent. Farrow pocketed the envelope. It would keep until after breakfast.

The phone rang back inside the house.

He let the flyscreen slam behind him. 'Hello?'

'Will, mate. It's Pete. Boss wants a chat. You free?'

From the thrum on the line Farrow knew the call was coming from the mill floor. He swapped the receiver to his other ear. 'Wayne still take lunch in his office?'

'One o'clock. Could set your watch to him. But you know how he is, mate. Only quiet he ever gets.'

Farrow swirled the remains of his coffee. He tipped the bitter dregs down the sink.

'I'll be there at one.'

Farrow opened the bedroom door. In the morning light he looked over his daughter, a frail shape beneath the sheets, knees tucked close to her chest.

His voice was low. 'You awake?'

Nicole didn't stir. A framed photograph of her and her mother sat on the bedside table. The photo was taken almost a year ago, on the morning of the girl's eleventh birthday. Farrow's jaw clenched at the sight of it.

He left as quietly as he came.

It was past dawn by the time someone responded to their call.

Royce saw the spew-green Falcon rolling down the empty stretch long before he heard the growl, the shape of the vehicle unsteady in the rippling heat, two men inside. They parked next to the LandCruiser, and Walker struggled out of the passenger side. He had a camera with a zoom lens hanging from his neck, and the weight of it seemed to pull his squat body even closer to the ground. He let out a whistle when he saw Royce's dirt-dusted uniform. 'Mate, you must feel like shit.'

McIntyre switched off the Falcon's ignition, hauled himself out, and joined Walker by the road's edge. His shirt buttons struggled to close around his barrel chest and he scratched at the hairless skin beneath. Both men were uniformed constables like Royce, but they had been working rural since they qualified, each of them born and bred for the slow beat. Royce had only been here for a couple of days now, but already he had a feeling that Walker and McIntyre were rough about his transfer. Three cops in a small station was overkill. Four meant somebody was going to tread on toes.

Eddie glanced at his watch. 'Radio went through hours ago.'

'Fast as we could, boss,' McIntyre said. 'You know how Maloney is. Takes half the bloody day to call us.'

While they had been waiting for the backup, Eddie explained to Royce how the relay worked. With a town as small as Caleb's Well, radio calls had to go through one of the bigger stations nearby. The station would then phone each officer in the Well to pass on the

message. The system was hardly perfect, and it often led to delays, but it was the only option Central offered.

Eddie turned his head and spat, the thick gobbet hissing on the bitumen. ‘Don’t go stomping on everything, all right? We’re in the dark here. There’s blood, but not a lot of it. Now I’m sure it’s nothing severe, but we have to be careful.’

When Royce was working Central, the Forensic Branch would handle a scene like this. But rural police had to be able to adapt, become a jack-of-all-trades when necessary. The detectives in Brisbane had a saying about that.

‘Want one of you up here searching for tyre marks,’ Eddie said.

McIntyre cut him off. ‘I can do it, boss.’

Eddie nodded. He pointed at Royce. ‘You stick with me and Walker then, okay?’

While McIntyre scanned the bitumen up top, the three remaining officers slid down the embankment. Walker grabbed Royce’s shoulder at the bottom of the incline, and passed him the camera. ‘Make sure you get everything.’

Royce turned the camera over in his hands, feeling the weight of it. It looked new for the most part, the workings clean and oiled. He had heard Central recently equipped every rural station with a high-end camera for evidence photographs and mugshots. But the Well didn’t have the means to develop colour photographs and the closest place was over an hour away, back northeast towards Brisbane.

‘You ever use one?’ Walker asked.

Royce shook his head. ‘Not like this.’

Walker slapped him on the back. ‘Well, I’m sure someone like you can work it out.’

Royce hooked the camera’s lanyard over his neck, and wondered what *someone like you* meant to someone like Walker.

Over the next two hours they searched the overgrown scrub around the hatchback, but found only the sun-bleached remains of road kill and a couple of smashed bottles. Royce doubled-back and probed the markings where the car came down off the road, the slashes of churned earth and torn grass leading down the embankment.

Walker called out to them from nearby. He was standing downwind, waving at them from the ditch that ran alongside the road.

They jogged over.

‘What you got?’ Eddie said.

Walker shrugged. ‘Dunno. Path maybe.’

A clear trail ran through the scrub, headed the same direction as the footprints Royce had found last night. The pallid soil was compacted into a snaking line about a meter wide and the leaves and branches on either side were stained dark brown.

Eddie clicked his fingers. ‘Photo.’

Royce crouched down low with the camera, took aim through the viewfinder, and depressed the shutter-release. The sun hovered over the distant foothills behind him and his shirt clung to his back like a damp hand.

McIntyre slid down the embankment from up top.

‘Find anything?’ Eddie asked.

McIntyre shook his head. ‘Clean.’

‘All right then,’ Eddie said. ‘Walker, McIntyre. I want you to keep moving. Clear path here so follow it. We got more blood. Which means things might be worse than we hoped.’

Walker nodded. ‘Boss.’

The two constables headed further down the gravel ditch, away from Eddie and the damaged hatchback. They shared a laugh between themselves.

Royce dropped his eyes to the stained scrub. Darkness bloomed at the edges of his vision, almost creating a tunnel, an alleyway. He gripped the camera tighter as if to anchor himself.

Eddie crouched down beside him. 'What do you reckon?'

The Sergeant had rarely left Royce's side since the transfer. And Royce himself wasn't yet sure if Eddie was simply eager, or if maybe he knew about everything that had happened back in Brisbane. 'Something heavy, I reckon,' Royce said. 'Definitely dragged.'

'Could be a big bag, maybe a suitcase. Plenty of them in the car.'

'Haven't got your years. But I've never seen a suitcase bleed.'

Eddie pulled at a stray whisker, grunted.

'So what do we do?' Royce asked. 'Call in the heavy hitters?'

'Could be anything,' Eddie said. 'Big boys won't even take a piss if they don't have an audience.'

Royce knew Eddie was right. The closest major investigation branch was over two hours away in Maloney, a little coastal town near Currumbin. Word down the wire painted the Detective Sergeant as a mongrel cop who only pushed the high profile cases. Royce had heard about a shooting they pulled about two months before his transfer, and the case involved a politician's niece in some kind of murder-suicide. The finer details hadn't been released yet, but the whole thing was a media frenzy. There was no chance Eddie could pull them this far inland for a banged up car and a bit of blood.

Eddie continued. 'Besides, one city cop is enough for me to babysit right now.'

Royce adjusted the camera's lens. In the distance he could see the last wisps of smoke from the fires last night, the coiling shapes drifting over crooked utility poles.

With his forearms resting on his knees, Eddie began to search the scrub bordering the makeshift path. There was something caught in the roots of the nearby spinifex. He leant

down close and picked it up with a handkerchief from his pocket. It was a triangle shaped pendant hanging from an interlinked chain. There were deep scratches in the silver, the whole thing sticky with blood.

Eddie pointed to the camera around Royce's neck. 'Hope they brought an extra roll for that thing.'

After her father left the house, Nicole struggled out of bed and dressed herself. Storm season hadn't yet arrived, but already there were blossoms of mould growing in the recesses of her bedroom coving, even more along the faded walls of the hallway outside. She couldn't stand the mould's fusty odour, or the way it sapped the air from her lungs, and she pinched her nose shut as she padded towards the kitchen. The house was not even three decades old, yet it was already growing worn and weathered. And now, with her mother gone, it was only getting worse.

She took an old chop from the fridge, dropped it into the dog's bowl, and headed outside. When the animal heard the flyscreen slam he loped towards her through the withered grass of the rear yard.

'Hello Boo,' she said. The animal's name was a childish mangling of *boy*, a holdover from when she was a toddler.

Nicole rested her hand atop the dog's flank as he greedily ate the chop. Her fingers traced the shape of his ribs as they expanded with breath.

Someone pulled into the driveway out front and the hum of their engine was smooth and quiet, nothing like the diesel rumble of her father's ute.

Nicole stood and listened.

There was a knock at the front door.

Farrow dropped the accelerator and followed the curve of the road into town. On the stretch before the mill he passed sugarcane growing roadside, the green tipped wisps standing tall, flower of the plant drifting above the stalk as if caught in an updraft.

His father had died out there in the brake. Heart attack. Almost fourteen years ago to the day. The tractor he had been driving at the time lost control, ran a drainage ditch and tipped. The farmers called him an ambulance, but it was too late. He was buried in the local cemetery before lunchtime the next day. That's what Farrow was told, anyhow. His old man had been cold in the ground a good two years before he set foot in the Well again.

He found Pete waiting in the mill's rear lot, hands hidden in his overall pockets, a limp cigarette drooping from his lips. The lone stack steamed behind him and the elongated shadow sheltered him from the midday sun. 'Mate,' he said. 'Long time.'

Farrow slammed the ute door. 'In his office?'

Pete flicked his cigarette butt. 'Take you to him.'

The two men entered the open mill house, moving across wooden planks laid out over sodden soil. The air inside shuddered with the roar of the machines and Farrow felt the force in his bones. Passing a group of red-faced millers at the conveyor head, they came off the floor and into the bare loading yard.

'What do you reckon?' Pete asked.

Farrow had noticed the loose pipes immediately. The joints were seeping and the bolts were rattling. If something pried loose and struck a spark, it could cause a blast. The machines needed servicing by someone who knew what they were doing, someone like him. 'Machines are rough,' he said. 'Centrifuge will go before anything else.'

'Fucking knew it,' Pete said. 'Half the floor is the same. I keep telling him, but he won't listen. Mind's stuck on the strike.'

Farrow had known Pete for years now, their fathers working the same field back when they were kids. Not long after the shifts had started dropping, Wayne pegged Pete as a go-between for dealing with the millers. Pete wasn't a soft man, but he had the touch for breaking bad news, and there was plenty going around these days.

'Who's Wayne got on?' Farrow asked.

'Hollister.'

Farrow shook his head. 'Man's a drunk.'

'You don't know the half of it,' Pete said.

A small convoy of trucks approached from down the road, exhaust pipes wheezing acrid clouds of diesel smoke. They pulled up nearby on the bitumen, and ash-dusted farmers exited the cabs, their eyes bloodshot, calloused hands weeping. One of them slurped from a canteen and spilt water exposed sunburnt flesh beneath the soot.

Among the men Farrow saw Wayne coming towards him, the man's slight frame obvious among the burly workers. He polished his glasses with a handkerchief. 'Will, lad,' he said. 'How about you and I head to my office for a chat.'

It wasn't a question.

The office was nothing more than a cramped demountable just outside the mill entrance. Filing cabinets were pressed up against every wall and piles of paperwork filled the spaces between. Farrow sat down in front of Wayne's desk.

'You know what time it is?' the mill manager asked.

A fluorescent light hummed in the joists above them.

'An important time,' he continued. 'Not just for you and me, but for the whole mill. All the guys here work hard, and they deserve better than what's coming. We've actually got a chance to make things right, to secure our future. But we need to be on the same page, especially if we want to get a message across to the new owners. We can't have some of us rowing the boat backwards.'

There was a knock outside. Harry stooped low as he strode through the demountable doorway. Sweat glistened on his shaved head and the beads ran down his temples, disappearing into his thick beard. 'Got those invoices you were after.'

Wayne signaled him over to the desk.

Harry was Wayne's unofficial right hand at the mill. He was always around, watching, taking notes. Some of the men said his job was all show, but others knew better than to talk behind his back. Farrow was certain of one thing though—Harry was the only miller still working enough shifts to drive a brand new Charger.

Wayne looked over the paperwork. 'You take care of that other thing?'

Harry met Farrow's eyes, his face tight. 'Yes.'

'Good,' Wayne said.

Harry lingered too long before leaving. He closed the door on his way out.

Wayne lit a cigarette. 'Will, lad. I know you've done a lot for the Well. People look up to you. Listen to you. That's something to think about. So if you have problems with mill management, then you come and see me. You don't go yabbering down at the pub.'

Farrow knew it was only time until someone said something. You couldn't piss in this town without everyone finding out. The place was too small, stifling. It was half the reason he first left.

Up on the wall behind Wayne's desk there was a monochrome photo of men standing in a field of cane, all of them wearing singlets and shorts. Farrow saw his father right up front. 'Couldn't complain if I had the shifts.'

Wayne let the smoke lilt from his nostrils. 'I understand. But I've got Hollister and some of the other fitters to think about.'

'Hollister's a fuck up,' Farrow said. 'Soon you'll have no machines to fix.'

'Seniority means priority. That's how it was done in your old man's day. That's how it's done now. Things are tough for everyone and I know that. Hell, I'm copping it too. I've been working half my hours for nothing, and I got three kids to feed. But bellyaching doesn't help things.'

'Backpay,' Farrow said. 'I want what I'm owed.'

Wayne leant across the desk, his hot breath in Farrow's face. 'We're all family here. Family help each other out. You need your money and I understand that. But I need to know that you're here for everyone else.'

Farrow knew where this was going. He dropped his eyes to his boots.

'Strike meet day after next,' Wayne said. 'I want to see you there, and I want sunshine coming from your mouth. I know it's been years since your last fight, but a lot of the young fellas still look up to you.'

Farrow wasn't privy to every detail, but he knew the basics about the possible stop-work. A year ago now the former mill owner had died suddenly and left everything to his son, a stone-washed burnout living on the Tasmanian coastline. The son didn't give a shit about the mill or the Well, and he was more than happy to let Wayne keep control as long as

the money was coming in. But the mill had been flagging for a long time now, and the place needed some up-front cash to get back to working standard. It wasn't money the kid was willing to spend and he started pushing for a complete sale.

Some corporation Farrow had never heard of had been vying to pick up the mill for a couple of months now. Rumour around work said they were buying up multiple enterprises and running them dry for the potential real estate. But no one could be sure. It didn't take much guesswork to figure who was spreading the word. If the mill was sold then there was no guarantee Wayne would hold his position.

Farrow mulled it over. The girl, the house, everything he owed. He would have to take the hit and roll with it. It wasn't like he didn't know how.

Wayne offered his hand to Farrow. 'I knew you'd see me right. Make sure you give my best to your little girl, will you?'

Farrow stood up and took his boss' hand into his, squeezed hard.

Eddie radioed the Well's only auto-repair for a tow and the truck arrived almost an hour later, the man behind the wheel unshaven, his swollen paunch resting on his bony knees.

Norm's Towing and Auto-Repair was painted along the driver's side door in a rusting cursive.

Eddie nodded. 'Norm.'

The man pointed to the hatchback in the scrub. 'That it?'

'Too much to ask?'

Norm laughed, reversed the truck, and set the rear wheels against the edge of the embankment. He dropped down from the cab after switching off the engine, and began to lower the rear chain.

Royce crossed his arms.

'You right to do this?' Eddie asked. 'You were a bit rattled last night.'

High above them an eagle cried out as it circled the air, flank dark, tail wedged like an arrowhead. The bird flew low and perched itself on a tree standing alone in the scrubland, balancing on its sole leg. The other was nothing more than a marred stump.

'Why drag something so far from the crash?' Royce asked. 'Wouldn't it be easier to take your vehicle down there, load it up from the bottom.'

'Steep drop,' Eddie said. 'Maybe they didn't want to get stuck.'

'Or maybe they saw us coming and panicked.'

Further down the road McIntyre and Walker sat in the Falcon. The tinny radio speakers were spitting the cricket score and the voice of the commentator was barely more than static.

Royce nodded towards them. ‘Know you would’ve said something if you recognised the car. But what about those two?’

‘Walker couldn’t make his mother in a line-up,’ Eddie said. ‘And McIntyre would take the glory as soon as soon as he could.’

Norm struggled down the embankment, boom chain hanging limp over his shoulder. The mechanic’s pants were tattered around the waist and the crack of his arse winked at Royce. When he finally reached the hatchback, he attached the hook to the rear bumper, then pulled the chain hard. Panting heavily, he began the struggle back up towards the road on all fours.

‘What about him?’ Royce asked. ‘If the car’s been to the chop-shop, then there should be records.’

Eddie considered it for a moment. ‘Norm. Come here.’

The mechanic wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans as he lumbered towards them.

‘How’s your paperwork?’ Eddie said.

‘Good enough.’

‘Learnt to read then?’

He scratched at his gut with oil stained nails. ‘Fuck you, mate.’

Eddie nudged Royce with an elbow. ‘Constable here has a question for you.’

Royce understood what the Sergeant was trying to do. You got to learn the ropes eventually. This is your beat now. ‘You recognise the car at all?’

‘See a few of them,’ Norm said. ‘Cheap Jap imports. Rubbish, I reckon.’

‘Can you run a serial through your files?’ Royce asked. ‘Look for details?’

‘You got a warrant?’

The question left him stumbling.

Eddie spoke up. ‘You were a pup once, Norm. Before you were a mongrel.’

Norm smiled at Royce. His remaining teeth were chipped and nicotine stained. ‘I’ll take a look. No promises, but.’ He walked back to the tow truck, and flicked a switch on the winch. The boom on the rear-bed suddenly groaned to life.

Royce followed Eddie over to the Falcon.

‘What now, boss?’ McIntyre said.

‘Norm reckons he might be able to trace our vehicle. But I want you two to head out to the milk bar near the Squats. Ask around, just in case.’

‘What about me?’ Royce said.

‘Shift’s over. Get some sleep.’

A memory unfurled in Royce’s mind—her face bruised and bloody, the skull cracked almost completely in half. He couldn’t go home. Not yet. ‘We’re pretty far from base,’ he said. ‘If we weren’t taking the long way, we wouldn’t have seen the car. Maybe I should check in with the closest station. The local might know the owners.’

McIntyre and Walker exchanged glances inside the Falcon.

Eddie took off his hat and rubbed his leathery neck.

‘What is it?’ Royce asked.

McIntyre leant out the driver’s side window. ‘They didn’t tell you shit when they sent you out here, did they?’

Royce turned to Eddie for an answer, but the older man shook his head.

‘James, mate,’ Walker said. ‘We *are* the local.’

Royce arrived home to find Anna in the back bedroom. She was trying to slide a box of winter clothes into the wardrobe, but she was struggling, the cardboard gaining no traction on

the wooden floor. Other boxes just like it were stacked behind her. As she leant forward to push harder, the material of her dress lifted to reveal tanned flesh, the muscles in her legs becoming tense, defined.

Royce rested his weight on the doorframe. 'Need some help?'

Anna flinched. She put a palm to her chest. 'Caught me red-handed. I was starting to go stir-crazy just sitting around all day.'

Royce helped her push the box away into the recess of the wardrobe, and then did the same with those remaining. Except for the bed and dresser against the far wall, the room was now bare, and it reminded him of a cheap motel.

'Where's Shaun?' he asked her.

'Napping. Why?'

Anna's hair had grown damp with sweat and the tangled locks framed her heart-shaped face. She was wearing an old floral dress that had stretched with the years and the formless material did nothing to hide the growing bump of her stomach.

Royce placed his hand on her hip and kissed her. Anna pulled back and looked up at him, metallic flecks mottling the blue around her pupil like gold in a fossicker's pan. He reached under her dress to find thigh. A thin sheen of drying sweat left her skin cool to the touch. Something shifted in her expression and she began to undo the buttons on his uniform.

Stepping out of the shower, Royce caught his own reflection in the bathroom mirror. He had grown skinny over the last couple of months, his appetite waning with the stress of work and his lack of sleep. Royce had played Aussie Rules religiously as a teenager, and it had left him lean and strong for his first years on the force. But now his dark eyes were set deep into the

skull, his hairless cheeks stretched like a drum. The changes left him looking angry and feral, almost as if his face was locked into a permanent rictus.

Out in the kitchen he found Anna making a sandwich on the countertop. 'Hope you're hungry,' she said.

Royce sat down at the table. The roof groaned a whale song above him as the hot tin began to settle in the dying light. 'What if you pushed yourself too hard? You remember how it was the first time,' he said. 'Barely had the energy to move.'

She brought over two plates with a ham and salad sandwich on each, placed one in front of Royce, and then sat down opposite. 'You know me.'

'I do,' he said. 'That's half the problem.'

From down the hall Shaun let out a strangled cry. He had been uneasy for days now, ever since the big move. Royce had a feeling the kid was still getting used to the place, the sheer shock of waking up in a strange room bringing him to tears. He could understand that.

Royce raised a hand. 'I got it.'

Anna shook her head. 'You know what he's like.'

Royce got a beer from the fridge after watching her leave the room. On the wall by the sink there was a bottle opener screwed into the wood, and he popped the cap with a drop of his fist. The sagging house shook with the force. The place was an old rental, at least fifty years or so, and it had been organised alongside the transfer from Brisbane, as if that somehow improved the situation. Boxes still filled most of the free space and it left the narrow halls feeling even more claustrophobic. You know why you're putting it off, Royce thought. Unpacking makes it true.

Anna came back into the kitchen. She sat down at the table with Shaun on her lap, and began to jostle him on her knee, trying to calm him. Royce knew the toddler's features echoed his own, enough people had told him so. But he saw none of himself in his son's face,

or in the way he moved, and he often wondered if his own father had thought the same thing about him.

‘You’ve gone quiet,’ Anna said.

‘Just tired.’

‘We can talk. You know, if you need to.’

Royce took a swig from his beer. Through the window above the sink he could see the backyard. The sun was slowly setting and the shadows were left hobbled in the fading light. He weighed it up before going with the lie. ‘I know.’

Farrow came back into town along the dry riverbed. The road was unmarked and narrow, sun-browned grass sprouting either side of the bitumen, fields beyond stretching towards encircling hills.

German settlers had founded this place more than a century ago now. Back then the land was stony, dense with towering gums and bitter barks. But once the blacks had been pushed out, everything was cleared. The woodlands were chopped down and the scrub was burnt clean. When they finally found fresh water, the town earned its name. And eventually homes were built in the hope of a future, and then the mill.

Farrow pulled the ute off onto the curb. From the driver's seat he looked over what was left of his old man's boxing gym. White ants had infested the wooden walls and the hole by the door seemed bigger. Farrow had put his fist through there after coming back to the Well and finding out about his father's passing. At the time it had made more sense than visiting his grave.

He drove across town and parked at the back of the local grocer's. On the radio a male voice ticked away in a monotone:

...and a big welcome back to our regular listeners this sunny afternoon. Today is Monday the 18th of November, only a year since the federal election. And already we are hearing more rumblings in the heart of Brisbane. Rumour has it that Queensland Premier

Joh Bjelke-Petersen is launching a new campaign into federal politics. This push is allegedly gaining traction with quite a few powerful Gold Coast players. If things keep going the way they are, the silver bodgie in Canberra may have a few concerns come next election. In my humble opinion...

Farrow cut the ignition. He wasn't interested in politics, or the kind of men who involved themselves in it.

The bell above the grocer's door rang out as he made his way inside. Mariah was working the till today and she looked up at Farrow standing in the doorway, her blonde hair almost white underneath the hanging floodlights. His mind reeled to that night a lifetime ago, back when he was a teenager, the dust of the gym floor in his nose, hand cupping a smooth breast. Farrow dropped his eyes to the peeling floor, kept walking.

Rifling through the shelves at the back of the store, he found a collection of tinned pasta and soup. The contents of each were ready to be poured straight into the pot. So simple a child could do it. Molly used to look after all of this—the cooking, the cleaning. But after she left, what else could Farrow do? He should've known it was coming. A year ago now she had tried to take Nicole and leave him for the first time, back when the shifts first started dropping at the mill. 'I know you're worried about money,' she had told him. 'But it's no excuse to act this way. We're your family.'

He and Molly argued into the night, yelling at each other and throwing plates and cups. And even though Farrow would never lay a hand on her or the girl, the blue was bad enough for a concerned neighbour to call the police. The next morning, after they had both calmed down, Farrow laid it out for her. He would never let her take the girl from him, not after everything he had given up in Brisbane. And for a while that was enough to keep her there in the Well. But even then Farrow knew it was nothing but borrowed time.

A familiar voice spoke up behind him. 'Will.'

Farrow turned to see his neighbour Norm lumbering towards him from the front of the store. 'Thought that was you,' he said. 'Haven't seen you in donkey's. Work today?'

Farrow shook his head. 'Not enough shifts.'

'Looked a serious burn, but. Saw it still going this morning on a call out. Ended up being nothing but a ditcher. But you know, work's work.'

Small talk made others comfortable, but not Farrow. He only listened because Norm was harmless for the most part, sometimes even helpful. A couple of weeks ago he had loaned Farrow enough money to keep the bank at bay for a little longer. His missus would have to know by now. The two of them owned the local servo and Norm wasn't the kind of man to keep cash on hand with the pub so close. It was only time until she sent him to come and collect.

'I should be going,' Farrow said.

Norm tilted his head. 'You right, mate? Look a little green around the gills.'

Farrow headed to the front counter, a bundle of cans balanced in the bough of his arms. Mariah served him without meeting his eyes, and when she told him how much he owed, her voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

Under the dim kitchen light, Farrow poured two cans of soup into a pot, then lit the stovetop with a match. Flame licked the cast iron base and curls of oil and fat formed on the broth's surface. Cheap soup meant cheap meat, almost more gristle than flesh.

Farrow raised the heat and began to stir.

Down the hall a door creaked open. Nicole shuffled into the kitchen a moment later and sat down at the table.

‘Hungry?’ Farrow asked.

She shrugged. ‘Where were you?’

Farrow kept stirring. ‘Work.’

‘You going back?’

He took two bowls from the rack by the sink, poured soup straight from the pot into each, and passed one to the girl. ‘Maybe.’

Nicole probed her food with a spoon. She looked more like her mother everyday.

‘You feeling better?’ he asked.

The girl kept her eyes lowered. ‘No school.’

‘You can’t sit around here all day,’ he said.

‘But you do.’

Farrow felt gutted. He picked up his bowl and began to eat.

Outside in the yard the wind skirled through the trees. The dog whined and scratched at the back door in a plea for entrance.

‘You lock the side gate?’ he asked. ‘Dog’ll get out otherwise.’

‘Someone came looking for you today,’ the girl said. ‘Tall, with a beard. He left you something.’ She leant to one side and brought out an envelope from her back pocket.

Farrow eyed it. The paper was wrinkled and worn. ‘What time?’

‘Not long after you left.’

‘Leave it on the table,’ he said, and the girl did as she was told.

Farrow returned to the kitchen later that night. He opened the envelope to find money inside—twenties and fifties held together with a rubber band. He counted the cash out onto the table and it was exactly what he was owed. The mill didn't have enough funds to give him a shift, yet here he was with an envelope of cash, sent before he had even agreed on the strike.

He closed his eyes and balled his fists on the formica. Understanding slowly loomed over him. He was being curbed, and it was forgone he would crumble with the blow. To Wayne he was nothing but a dog, a mutt that would rollover for the right kind of treat. But Wayne had to learn some dogs don't heel.

The pub was busy this time of night. Men crowded the island bar and their voices were raised above the sound of the jukebox, overalls reeking of sweat and cheap cigarettes. Farrow made his way inside and spotted some familiar faces in the far corner. But before he could reach them, a hand met his chest. It was Pete, his fat upper lip coated in beer froth. 'Mate, you don't look impressed,' he said.

Farrow told him about the meeting this afternoon. About the envelope.

'Shit,' Pete said. 'I don't know what to say.'

'Someone's been talking about me. Behind my back.'

'Mate, you know me,' Pete said. 'Would tell you if I knew.'

He cracked his knuckles. 'They here?'

Pete jerked his head towards the rear of the room, and Farrow looked over the man's shoulder. Wayne was sitting by the pool table, watching Harry play against a young guy in

overalls—it was Mick, Wayne’s nephew. The kid’s shaggy blonde hair was in his eyes and he was stumbling over his own feet as he circled the table.

The jukebox by the front door switched tracks. Slide guitar suddenly broke from a vinyl hiss, the sound raw and overdriven.

Pete pulled out a stool. ‘Come on, mate. More trouble than it’s worth. We aren’t teenagers anymore.’

They ordered beers and drank them at the far end of the wooden bar, right by the front door. On the wall nearby there were photographs of football players and other local sportsmen. Farrow saw himself at the top, his gloves raised high, face smooth and youthful.

‘Hoping I would run into you,’ Pete said. ‘Wanted to talk about something big. Reckon you and a few of the others might be interested. But it’s gotta come off the back of something.’

‘The strike,’ Farrow said.

Pete nodded, schooner held close to his chest. ‘Gotta play our cards right. But the payoff will be worth it. Double pay at first. Then guaranteed shifts.’

‘Wayne’s put you in a good spot,’ Farrow said.

‘Had a gutful, mate. Sick of shovelling shit and bad news. But all that is gonna change. Wish I could say more, but I promised someone I would stay quiet until the meet goes through.’ He signalled towards Wayne with a finger. ‘Best if everyone stays quiet, you know what I mean?’

Farrow wiped his glass with a thumb. He let the bead of condensation roll down into his palm. ‘What are the odds on going ahead?’

‘At this stage? Deadset.’

Farrow nodded. ‘Keep me posted.’

Pete sipped his beer. ‘Always do.’

Cackling laughter broke out across the room. Mick had torn the tabletop with a wayward shot, and the point of the cue was stuck beneath the felt. The kid seemed to think it was the funniest thing he had ever seen. But Wayne looked like he disagreed. He stood up, shook his head, and started for the toilet at the back of the pub.

Farrow watched the door close, then reached for the envelope in his back pocket.

Standing at the urinal, Wayne began to hum beneath his breath, eyes scanning the moisture stains on the wall before him. In red marker someone had written above the porcelain *Todd Foals fucks Molls*. Wayne laughed. Warmth splashed his leg and he realised his hand was drifting. ‘Shit,’ he said, and aimed for the trough again.

Out on the pub floor he heard a group of men cheer. Others joined in until there was a chorus, the voices flattened by the tiled walls. Wayne zipped his fly and headed for the sink. With a paper handtowel he dabbed at the wet patch on his pants until it faded.

Back around the bar there was a commotion. Someone in the crowd of men was shouting, ‘Beer on the house.’ Bluey was at the taps pulling drinks and his sweaty shirt clung to his body as he swung foamy schooners.

Wayne walked back over to his stool. On the pool table nearby his nephew balanced a clover of full glasses on the wooden edging.

‘What’d I miss?’ Wayne asked.

‘Some nut bought the whole pub drinks,’ Mick said. ‘Get in before it’s dry.’

Wayne’s face went taut. He looked around until he spotted Harry coming back from the bar, an empty envelope in hand.

The ringing phone pulled Royce from a nightmare, the same one as always. He left Anna alone in bed and stumbled out into the unlit kitchen.

A familiar voice growled down the line. ‘James. It’s Walker. Know it’s late, but Eddie needs you on something. Be around in five.’

Royce dressed himself in a uniform from the ironing basket, and then headed outside to wait for his ride. His collar was still damp from the wash this afternoon and when the wind howled down the street a chill ran through him. He had a dry shirt back inside the bedroom, but he wanted to let Anna get her rest, especially with the due date only a few months away.

Dust rose in the growing headlights of the LandCruiser.

‘Fight at the pub,’ Walker said as Royce climbed inside. ‘McIntyre and Eddie are on their way.’

‘Four cops for a punch-up?’ Royce asked. ‘Bit excessive.’

‘Mate, gutful of piss and they don’t even see the badge. Need all we can get.’

The radio in the dash crackled to life as they drove: *McIntyre here. Just pulled up. Got some Squat boys. Things are going sour. Over.*

As the LandCruiser turned onto Caleb’s Road, the pub came into sight. It was a low-set wooden building with a parapet up top, *Keg’s* painted along the curve. Out by the front verandah a group of cheering men encircled the scrap. Most of them were still dressed in stained work clothes, and they waved their beers in the air like a mob with torches.

Walker pulled up sharp onto the footpath. Royce saw Eddie in the middle of the throng now, baton out, laying into a miller throwing wild haymakers. McIntyre was by his side and he had someone's arm twisted up behind their back.

Royce dropped down from the LandCruiser and rushed towards them, but the circle of men wouldn't budge and he was forced to push his way inside. Someone in the crowd shoved Royce hard and he tripped over his own feet, staggering against a fleshy back drenched in sweat and beer. The force of movement continued through the group like dominoes. Dropped glasses shattered.

'Fuck off,' someone yelled, voice slurred.

When Royce finally reached the middle of the crowd, a shirtless man broke away from the group and charged him headfirst. Royce sidestepped the movement and kicked the man in the arse. He toppled over and disappeared back into the crowd. A second tried to blindside him, but Royce clipped the man under the jaw with an uppercut, the crack of his teeth like billiard balls striking.

Eddie dropped his miller with a baton. 'Bout time, fellas.'

A young Aboriginal boy was sprawled across the ground nearby and he began to cough, blood from his swollen nose staining his footy jumper. Two more boys around his age stood above him and they were yelling and screaming at the crowd.

'A hand would be nice,' McIntyre yelled. He was sitting atop a fresh-faced guy in overalls, keeping him pinned to the dirt. Royce dropped his knee to the small of the guy's back and cuffed him.

McIntyre pulled the guy to his feet, but he was struggling to stand, his knees buckling. 'Stay the fuck up,' McIntyre said.

The fresh-faced guy lurched forward suddenly and tried to head-butt Royce across the nose. Royce threw a punch into the guy's stomach and the blow was hard enough to drop him and leave him dry heaving.

Walker and Eddie were pushing the crowd back towards the pub's entrance. 'Last warning,' Eddie yelled. 'Go now or spend a night in the tank. And I promise you'll be hurting when you wake up.'

The noise of the men died a little. One lone voice yelled, 'Fuckin' cops. Bad as the bloody boongs.'

The hate was nothing but bark though and the crowd began to disperse, some heading into the darkened streets and others returning to the pub. If they were going back inside, Royce thought. More booze would only fuel the fire. 'What about lock-out?' he asked.

McIntyre led the fresh-faced guy towards the Falcon parked on the road. 'Go on,' he said as he passed. 'You try and tell 'em.'

Eddie crouched down close to the Aboriginal kid. His friends were calm now, but their eyes wouldn't leave the departing crowd.

'What's your name again, mate?' Eddie said.

The kid took his hand from his jaw. 'Charlie.'

Eddie gave him his handkerchief. 'You been drinking, Charlie?'

The kid nodded. He wiped the blood from his face.

'We gotta take you back to the station,' Eddie said. 'Sort all this out. Okay?'

One of his friends spoke up, wild hair dusted gray, torn footy shorts hanging low beneath his hipbones. 'Can't lock him up with them fellas,' he said. 'They'll kill him.'

'We got a right spot for him,' Eddie said. 'Away from any trouble.'

The friend moved closer. 'I won't let you.'

‘He’ll be fine,’ Royce said. ‘Regular bed and breakfast. You can come stay too, if you want to keep this up.’

The friend toed the ground.

Charlie eased himself up out of the dirt, and followed Royce and Eddie over to the LandCruiser. He got into the back without cuffs or a struggle. Music began to play inside the pub again and a raised voice yelled something indecipherable.

‘Chances of getting my beauty sleep?’ Royce asked.

Eddie slid into the driver’s side. ‘Pretty enough already.’

Across the road, almost hidden in the gloom, Royce saw a tall and sinewy figure watching the pub. A car passed along the road briefly and the headlights washed his face, the paling light revealing cold eyes above sharp cheekbones, lank hair lying lifeless on the scalp.

Royce leant in through the open window. ‘Who’s that?’

But before Eddie could answer, the figure turned and disappeared into the night.

II

Royce phoned his father before work the next morning.

The news had mentioned a storm hitting the New South Wales border, and he couldn't help but imagine his old man cooped up alone in that ruin he called a home, the roof shingles loose, brick walls crumbling and leaking in the mountain wind. But after the tenth ring Royce hung up. Like most days, his father would be out in the overgrown yard, tending to the vegetable patch that grew in the gnarled shadow of his mother's gum.

He took his beat-up VW to work and parked in the side yard of the station, right next to the abandoned hatchback. Someone had draped a tarp across the boot and rear windscreen overnight, and it left the shape unidentifiable to any curious passer-by. Royce looked over the damaged headlight as he locked his door. There were flecks of red paint scratched into the exposed metal.

A radio played inside the shift office, and the twang of the country standard was lost in the long halls and vast rooms of the old converted Queenslander. Royce sat down at his desk to find an unfamiliar map pinned to the wall, *Caleb's Well* written along the bottom. With no concern for symmetry, someone had marked the town and land around with a yellow highlighter, the neon ink stretching far beyond the surrounding foothills and towards the

coast. For the first time Royce truly understood the expanse of his posting, the sheer distance that separated the farms and houses. He tried to picture the near three hundred kilometres that lay between him and his old home in Brisbane, but it was almost too much to fathom.

Walker winked at Royce from across the room. 'For future reference, mate.'

Royce took the map down, folded it in half, and put it away in his desk drawer.

'Where's McIntyre?'

'In the tank. Seeing to our guests.'

A toilet flushed in the room next door. Eddie stepped out into the hall with a toothbrush between his teeth and a cracked mug in hand. Years ago the force had issued a blue service shirt for all officers, regardless of post. But Eddie was still wearing the old olive button-up, the front stained with a meal long-gone.

'Go home last night?' Royce asked.

'Swag in my office,' Eddie said. 'Easier than the drive.'

'Bet the ladies love it too,' Walker said.

Eddie spat into the mug. 'That's what I hear.'

'You tell the higher-ups about our find?' Royce said.

Eddie nodded. 'Was noted. But it's like I said. Nobody's coming until things turn serious. Maybe then we'll get some big fellas. And I stress maybe.'

'Is it serious?'

'Called the doctor in Warwick. Won't know proper until I send some of the photos over, but he reckons it doesn't sound like enough blood for anything concrete. Our driver could be alive.'

The shift office dimmed momentarily, a cloud drawing across the sun outside. A new song started to play on the radio and it sounded much like the last.

Walker pushed his chair back. 'Enough of that banjo shit now, boss?'

Eddie dropped the toothbrush into his mug. He walked over to the windowsill and turned the radio off. With the music now gone, Royce heard someone yelling, the voice hoarse and distant.

Eddie shook his head. 'Our fine guests.'

'Thought they would be sleeping off last night,' Royce said.

'Feeding time, maybe. Do me a favour. Couple of pies in the fridge. Deliver them out back, will you?'

In the rear yard of the station, Royce followed the cement path leading down to the tank—a solid brick building the police station used as a lock-up. The name came about through the locals, but Royce wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because the place usually housed the town's heaviest drinkers. Or maybe it was because the building itself could survive a war or two.

McIntyre answered the door. 'What?'

Royce showed him the greasy paper bag. 'Room service.'

The interior of the tank was simple. A watch desk overlooked two barred holding cells, and there was nothing much but a single bunk in each. McIntyre passed Charlie a bag in the far cell and Royce caught a glimpse of the kid's face. He looked about as tired as Royce himself felt.

'Oi, you,' someone in the closest cell said. It was the guy who had tried to head-butt Royce last night, but he wasn't looking so fresh-faced this morning. His overalls were stained with blood and his blonde hair was clumped to the scalp. 'Tell dickhead over there to give me a fucking chair or something. Sick of standing.'

A drunken miller snored loudly behind him on the lone bunk. His nose was purple and swollen. Eddie must have roughed him over something fierce last night.

'What do you reckon, dickhead?' Royce said.

McIntyre bit into his cold pie, the flaking pastry like dandruff on the desktop. ‘Too good for the floor, are we?’ he said, mouth full.

The not-so-fresh-faced guy looked at the cement beneath his feet. It was stained by years of piss, blood, and other bodily fluids. ‘Not sitting on that mess.’

‘Why?’ McIntyre said. ‘Bit too hard for your delicate arse? Maybe when your boyfriend wakes up, he can toughen you up.’

‘Fuck you,’ the not-so-fresh faced guy said. ‘Ain’t no poof. Come in here and I’ll fucking knock you on your arse.’

McIntyre stared him down. ‘Don’t push me, Mick.’

The guy backed away from the bars.

Royce returned to his desk inside the station. Down the hall he could hear an unfamiliar voice coming from Eddie’s office.

Walker circled the room, and sat down on a nearby filing cabinet. ‘You meet that fine example of a human being?’

‘Mick?’ Royce said. ‘Real charmer. Attitude like that, I would guess he’s a regular.’

Walker picked at something between his teeth. ‘Uncle’s a bigwig at the mill, first-hand man to the owner. We see old mate Wayne whenever Mick’s in trouble. Comes in all swinging dick like he owns the place.’

‘Anything worth a long stretch?’

‘History like his, you would guess so. Dad’s in Boggo for murder. Beat Mick’s mum to death in a domestic years ago. Mick was just a kid at the time but he saw the whole thing. His uncle ended up raising him. We pick him up for bar fights every now and then. You know, when he’s on the piss.’

‘But that’s part and parcel with the Well, right?’

A bloodless smile scarred Walker’s face. ‘Catching on.’

The voices from down the hall grew closer, and Eddie entered the shift office with another man following. He was short with powerful tree-trunk limbs, the collar of his shirt buttoned so tight a dark roll of skin gathered at the edges.

The man started towards Royce with an outstretched hand. 'Don't think we've met. Name's Jacob.' His words were clear and deliberate, obvious traces of a private education.

Royce shook his hand. 'Constable James Royce. Just transferred in.'

'The pastor here works out at the Squats,' Eddie said.

Jacob laughed. 'Work is typically paid. But yes, I spend most of my time out there. Lot of people who need me.' He turned to Eddie. 'And that name doesn't help things at all.'

Eddie raised his hands as if being held up. 'Sorry. They do die hard.'

The phone began to ring on the wall nearby and Walker stood up from the filing cabinet to take the call.

'So how are you finding the Well?' Jacob asked.

Royce nodded. 'I'm getting there.'

'She can be rough, Constable. But you'll warm to her eventually.'

Walker snapped his fingers from across the room. He pointed at a pen on his desk, and Eddie tossed it to him underhand.

'Anyhow, I should probably take my nephew home before he gets too familiar with lock-up,' Jacob said. 'It was nice to meet you, James.'

'Charlie's blood?' Royce asked.

Jacob nodded. 'My sister's kid. She passed.'

'Sorry to hear that.'

'It's okay. Was a very long time ago now. Charlie and his brother were headed down a dark path after it happened. But I tried my hardest with them. Oldest is better now, after he kicked the drink anyhow. But Charlie...'

‘Kid’s good enough when he wants to be,’ Eddie said. ‘Just needs a bit of a push to get him through.’

Jacob forced a smile and Royce struggled to place the man’s age, his face devoid of markings or wrinkles. ‘In the end, I just hope that’s enough,’ Jacob said.

Walker hung up the phone. ‘That was Norm. Hatchback was at his shop about six months ago, again a year before that. Got a name and some details.’

‘And?’ Eddie said.

‘It’s a local.’

Nicole inched open her bedroom door. Down the hall she could see her father in the lounge room. He was sitting on the couch, watching television, the neck of a beer bottle hanging loose between his fingers.

It was late when Nicole heard him sidle home last night, almost morning. Maybe he hadn't gone to bed at all.

She climbed out into the backyard through her bedroom window. Boo watched her from the grass, a stalactite of drool hanging from his lips, and he let out a whine as she drew near. The girl brought her hand down along the bony nubs of his spine. 'Not today, Boo,' she said. 'Got to go alone.'

The road into town was glassy in the growing heat. Houses ran along either side and Nicole took her time as she walked past. She was hoping to glean a silhouette through an open window, or maybe hear the sound of a conversation coming from within. A car crawled by and she kept her eyes on the ground. She knew she was walking funny, but she could only hope the driver didn't notice. Even after so many trips, she still struggled to move with the flattened coat-hanger tucked into her jeans.

After half an hour of searching, Nicole found what she was looking for. The letterbox out front of the house was filled with unopened mail and the carport was empty. On top of that, something inside her told her it was the right place—maybe it was experience, maybe it

was intuition. Regardless, she knocked on the front door and placed her ear against the wood. When there was no answer or movement inside, she made her way around back.

In the rear yard she found an awning window. The bottom of the frame was set unevenly and there was a slight opening between the slat and wall. Nicole took out the coat-hanger, bent it over her knee, and needled it through the windowsill gap. Carefully she manoeuvred the hook around the internal lock, and then pulled the hammer downwards with her weight.

The hallway inside was dark. Nicole dropped down and crouched low, waited for her eyes to adjust. She began to search the house room by room, taking loose change she found on tables and in the pockets of dirty clothing.

In a kitchen reeking of soap and bleach, she found a bottle of vodka in the fridge. She unscrewed the top and sniffed the contents. The first time she had tried alcohol it left her sick for days. The bottle had been unlabeled, hidden on the top shelf of a pantry in a house much like this one. But she had gotten used to it over the last few months.

She took a slug from the vodka bottle and concentrated on the cold burn running down her chest and into her gut. Before putting it away again she gargled a mouthful and spat it back down the opening. She liked to leave something behind every time—a trace of herself.

In the master bedroom there stood a painted duchess, the rim around the mirror decorated with a series of floral carvings. Nicole searched through the drawers. She found an ivory hairbrush among the silk scarves and jewellery, and there were black hairs caught in the bristles. She picked at the thin strands with her fingers.

Nicole closed the window again before leaving. She secured the coat-hanger under her shirt and made her way towards the front yard.

As she rounded the corner of the house, she saw a police 4WD parked down the road, and for a brief moment panic seized her. She dropped down behind the rise of the verandah and watched the vehicle from afar. Two uniformed men sat inside. After a few long minutes, they got out and made their way up towards the front door of a nearby house.

Nicole closed her eyes. She didn't dare move until long after they were gone.

Royce took the straight route through town, passing old homes and closed up shop fronts. The doors on most were nailed shut and sheets of black plastic hung in the windows like a mourner's veil. One house had slabs of plywood out by the fence line and there were crudely painted messages across the front of each. He only made a few of them as he passed—*repent now, all sinners will drown in the tide, the time is now and He is coming.*

Walker put his feet up on the LandCruiser's dashboard. His shoes were crusted with dirt and the rough leather was unpolished, cracked. 'Heard your old man's a cop.'

'Detective,' Royce said. 'At least he was. Retired.'

'Bet he's proud of you then. Like father like son.'

Royce drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. 'Not really. Tried to talk me out of it. Someone shot him in the back on duty and the bullet tore his shoulder apart. Was half the reason he ended up retiring.'

Walker lowered his legs. 'Fuck me. They catch the guy?'

'No suspects. No witnesses.'

'Shit, mate. Why'd you join the force then?'

Royce asked himself the same question nearly every day, especially after everything that had happened in Brisbane.

When he was a young boy, Royce wanted nothing to do with the police force. He dreamed of helping people who needed it most, tending to them at the broken places as a doctor, or maybe a paramedic. But when he was fourteen years old, two high school kids robbed him on the walk home from school, and the memory was vivid, even after all these

years. On the route to his childhood house there was an underpass that ran beneath the rail line, a dark tunnel about thirty metres long. It was late afternoon when Royce had made his way inside and the light was already fading. He remembered hearing footsteps on the cement behind him, growing closer. And then, at the far end of the tunnel, a figure appeared and blocked his only exit. The two older boys knocked him to the ground, kicked him, punched him. They took his school bag and the scant money he was carrying.

After hobbling home, he told his father what had happened, trying his best not to cry. Royce recalled his father's face as he listened—calm, emotionless. When he was finished with the story, his father made a phone call, and only a few hours later they were driving to the local station. Through the perspex window of an interview room, Royce identified the two boys who attacked him. He never did find out what happened to them, but he could sense the power his father and the other officers held that day. He couldn't explain it back then, maybe because he didn't know any better, but something had shifted in the world. A wrong had been struck from the growing tally.

Further up the road a car pulled out from a side street and the driver struggled to make the turn. Royce checked his watch. It was too early for a morning nip, but around here was the perfect place to sleep off the night before.

Royce buzzed the siren.

'I'll take it,' Walker said.

The car pulled over to the curb and Royce brought the LandCruiser up as far as possible, bullbar almost touching the boot. Walker let himself out the passenger side. He spoke to the driver of the car through their open window. A licence was passed between the two of them, then a laugh.

Walker kept his hand in his pocket on the walk back to the LandCruiser.

The car drove off again, still struggling to keep to the road.

‘Know him?’ Royce asked.

‘Hollister,’ Walker said as he slid back into the passenger seat. ‘Regular at the pub. His axle is playing up. Said he’s going to get it fixed now.’

There was no need to check a licence if you knew the bloke. ‘How much you reckon that cost him?’

Walker’s brow filled with lines. ‘The axle?’

Royce accelerated. ‘Yeah. The axle.’

The address Norm had given them led to a house just like all those in the street, low-slung besser brick, roof angled frontwards so as to bring rainwater down into the yard. An older woman answered the front door in a ragged kaftan, and her slender frame was propped up by a walking stick.

‘Madeline White?’ Walker asked.

‘Call me Maddie. Guess you’ll wanna come in.’

They followed her down a dark hallway and into a lounge room filled with polished furniture, all of it out of place against the unpainted brick walls. Somewhere outside an animal moaned. The sound was loud enough to make Walker flinch.

‘Make yourselves at home,’ she said. ‘Just boiled the kettle.’

She was gone before they could decline, and when she came back into the room she was carrying a tea set on a tray. It rattled with every step, her left leg nearly an inch shorter than the right.

‘You need help?’ Walker asked.

‘Crippled,’ she said. ‘Not bloody dead.’

‘Mrs White, do you know why we’re here today?’ Royce asked.

She put the tray down on the table in front of them, then began to pour the tea. ‘Drink up. Plenty more where that came from.’

‘Mrs White,’ Walker said. ‘Please.’

She looked between the two of them. Her eyes were a faded blue, almost cataractic.

‘It’s about Rose, isn’t it?’

Royce took out his notepad. ‘Mrs White, who’s Rose?’

She sat down on a recliner by the television set. An old black and white western played out on the screen. ‘Rose is my granddaughter,’ she said.

Royce felt a memory flitter in his mind, like a pinprick of light in the darkness. The summer dress hanging from the grab handle. Not the kind of thing an older woman would wear.

‘She moved in here after me son’s accident,’ Madeline continued. ‘Haven’t seen her in months, but.’

Walker spoke up. ‘She’s missing?’

Madeline shook her head. ‘Been going her own way for a long time. Disappears for weeks at a time. It’s those rotten friends of hers. I’m always waiting for a knock at the door from you fellas, telling me she’s done something stupid.’

Royce took notes. ‘Does your granddaughter work?’

Madeline lit a cigarette. ‘If she does, she didn’t tell me. I know she had a bit of money though. Always buying new clothes and shoes. Thought she was stealing for a bit there. Tried to talk to her about it last time she was here. But she was acting all funny.’

‘Funny how?’ Royce said.

‘Rose’s always been a good girl. Did well in school, was polite, said her prayers. She likes a good laugh, no matter what.’ Madeline brought a veined hand to her face. ‘She always

had the rosiest cheeks as a baby. That's where her father got the name, you know. But when she was here last she just wasn't herself. I found her in the bedroom sitting on me bed. She said, Nan, if something happens to me, I want you to know I'm sorry. Sorry how things turned out. Sorry for what we done. It wasn't like her to say things like that.' The woman wiped her eyes.

'Mrs White,' Royce said. 'We found a car registered in your name. It was badly damaged.'

Madeline nodded, almost as if accepting the inevitable. 'I couldn't drive after me leg got worse. So I gave Rose the car.'

'Now, we don't know if Rose was the driver,' Royce said. 'That's why we need your help. Does Rose have a boyfriend? Or maybe you could tell me a little more about the people she spends time with.'

Madeline ashed her cigarette into a tray on the table. 'Told me once, a couple of months back, that she was seeing a fella. Other than that though, I haven't a clue. She kept that stuff to herself mostly. Brought over a few friends once or twice. But I put a stop to that. I don't want those kinds of people in me house. Few of them worked at the mill, I know that much. Overheard them talking.'

'Is there anything else you can tell me? Do you know where Rose might have been headed? Would she lend the car to anyone else?'

'I'm sorry,' Madeline said, her eyes growing distant. 'That's all I know.'

On the television screen a cowboy tumbled from his horse after a gut shot. He gripped his abdomen in pain, the wound surprisingly bloodless.

Walker cleared his throat. 'You mind if I take a look at her room?'

Madeline shook her head, slow to answer. 'Down to the left.'

Walker looked at Royce as he stood and Royce nodded. He watched the Constable disappear into the dingy hallway, passing a shelf lined with photographs and an unlit menorah. One photograph in particular caught Royce's eye. It was of Madeline as a middle-aged woman, a man with a mullet hugging her from behind.

'Do you have a photo of Rose we could have?' Royce asked.

Madeline eased herself up from the chair. She flipped through an album she kept on the bookshelf, and removed a polaroid, passed it to him. The photograph was of a young woman, a girl almost, long auburn hair cut into bangs, cheeks red and round.

Another animal wail came from outside, this time louder.

'I'm so sorry,' Madeline said. 'It's getting sunny. He doesn't like it when it's sunny.'

She led Royce through the rear flyscreen, and out onto the verandah. In the lone strip of sunlight a man sat in a wheelchair, his contorted eyes overlooking the backyard, face slack and pale. His hair was shorn close to the scalp, yet Royce still recognised him from the photograph inside.

'This is me son,' Madeline said. 'Rose's father.'

The man let out a gurgling grunt. He scratched at a pocked scar on the back of his head, the raised tissue running down his neck, along his shoulder, and into his singlet.

Madeline wheeled him out of the sunlight and into the shade. 'He worked at the mill,' she said. 'There was an accident on the job and he got the worst of it. He comes good some days, talks a little bit. But you caught him in a bad way.'

A crow cried out from a tree in the yard. The man mimicked the sound, eyes rolling in his head but seeing nothing.

Madeline continued. 'There was no health plan or insurance. And I thought we were going to go broke for a while there, with all those hospital visits and specialists. I prayed and

prayed though and God saved us. He sent us a saviour. Me son's boss, Mr Hastings, he kept on paying me boy like he was still at work.'

'What do you mean?' Royce said.

'Every week me son's pay would come in the mail,' she said. 'Like it used to. Little receipt and everything.'

Royce arrived home long after dark.

He and Walker had spent the afternoon talking with Eddie about the interview with Madeline—they gave him names, rough dates, possible mill connections. But the Sergeant had remained quiet the whole time, his arms crossed and eyes locked to the laminated desktop. The information Madeline had given them was solid, but there was still no sinew connecting the individual pieces, and they all knew the harsh truth of that.

Royce eased open the bedroom door to find Anna reading a book in bed. Shaun was sleeping in the spot next to her, his head resting on her thigh. When Anna finally noticed him watching her, she brought a finger upright to her lips. 'Dinner in the fridge,' she mouthed.

Out in the kitchen Royce turned on the gas and waited for his food to reheat. Inside his uniform pocket he had a duplicate of the polaroid Madeline had given him, folded into clean quarters. He opened it again to find a razor-sharp crease running through Rose's eyes. He flattened the copy out across the kitchen counter with his palms, holding it taught against the formica. But no matter what he did the mark still remained.

Farrow turned off his headlights and dropped the ute to a crawl.

The house looked much as he remembered, a bungalow made of brick and stucco, the paint pared by years of torrid wind. But the town itself had changed. Last time he visited Warwick it was like the Well. Now everything was suburban sprawl. The local grocer's had been replaced with a small shopping centre and the scrublands were cluttered with near identical homes. It reminded Farrow of his brief stay in Brisbane all those years ago. The borders of the city were starting to dissolve, its influence spreading outwards like a cancerous sunspot.

Someone moved past the front window and Farrow pulled up on the empty road. He couldn't tell if it was her, but the silhouette seemed familiar. Maybe it was Molly's sister. The place was hers after all. Briefly it crossed his mind that he may have seen wrong. The shape may have belonged to a man. Maybe a lover.

Farrow gripped the steering wheel until his fingers stung.

Before leaving this afternoon, he and the girl had shared an early dinner in the kitchen. It was the first thing Farrow had consumed all day, besides the six-pack and a half. As they ate he had wanted to say something, explain to her what was happening with him and where he was going this late at night. But the words just weren't there. It was probably for the best though. If Nicole had found out he was coming here tonight, she would have insisted on joining him. Farrow missed Molly every day, but when she finally left, she took something from the girl. Something he didn't fully understand.

The shape moved by the window once again, this time pausing at the glass. The lone streetlight cast long shadows over the house, but Farrow could still make out her face. Molly's dark hair was shorter now, cropped above the shoulders, and her pale skin was tanned. He tried to recall the tang of her breath, the familiar warmth between her legs. But already the memory seemed distant.

Farrow shifted gears and started the long drive for home.

III

Early the next morning, Royce and Eddie searched the hatchback out in the side yard, unloading suitcases and bags onto a foldout table from inside.

Knowing the owner meant nothing. They had to establish the ID of the driver and settle if they were alive. Or if the blood in the vehicle even belonged to them. Back in Brisbane Royce had only ever worked three deaths—a suicide at Kangaroo Point, a hit-and-run in West End, and a teenage girl in the Valley. The same girl that had led him all the way here, to the Well. Royce knew, even with his limited experience, that in most situations you could pull a wallet or purse from a person and get a name from there. But this was different. There was nothing concrete to hold onto.

Royce unzipped one of the suitcases. Inside he found skirts, belts, bras, and a single laced shoe. Eddie put on a pair of latex gloves and began sorting the clothes into piles on the tabletop. ‘Grandmother know what she take?’

‘Doubt it,’ Royce said. ‘Rose packed up a while ago now. Besides, she said the girl was always buying new stuff.’

‘So we got no idea if anything is missing.’

‘Or if this stuff is even hers.’

At the bottom of the suitcase Royce found a dress. Even with all the wrinkles he knew it was expensive, likely purchased from a boutique out of town. On the drive back to base yesterday, Walker had told him about the state of the girl's room. He had said everything was bare and clean, like a ghost had lived there. If this stuff belonged to Rose then there was no doubt she was packing in a hurry.

'You ever work a case like this?' Royce asked.

Eddie shrugged. 'Clearance rate is damn near perfect. Not gonna let something like this knock me down.'

'Bit different to a domestic though. Or a drunk and disorderly.'

'It's all in the attitude, mate.'

Between the stumps of the station Royce could see a cobweb shiver in the breeze, an elaborate pattern built with precision and patience. A fat-bodied spider sat in the middle of the web and its willowy legs clung to the intertwined lattice. All it would take is one strong gust, Royce thought. And the lot of it would be blown away.

Eddie opened another suitcase. 'Reckon we should play this pretty quiet. No need for word spreading around. Not until we know what's happened.'

Royce thought about yesterday. Walker was more than willing to cast a blind eye for Hollister. 'What about the other two? Seem pretty friendly with the locals.'

'Walker and McIntyre are rough around the edges, mate,' Eddie said, 'But they're not totally thick.'

No one could blame Royce for the concern. Police in the Well weren't exactly preoccupied with protocol, Eddie included. On his very first shift at the station, the Sergeant had told Royce to take his service weapon home. No need to sign it in or out. 'Place doesn't look much,' Eddie had said. 'But she can be wild when she wants to be. And you got to be ready for it.'

Anna wasn't so happy about the arrangement. She was worried Shaun might stumble upon the revolver and accidentally hurt himself. So Royce had taken to hiding the weapon in the spare room, deep among the unpacked boxes of books and magazines. Shaun would never find it there, and hopefully Anna wouldn't either.

He began to dust the interior of the hatchback. The blood along the floor and seat had dried over the last two days and the colour had grown dark like soil after heavy rain. Although Royce checked all over the dash and around the steering wheel, he couldn't find one usable print inside. His mind reeled back to the night they first found the vehicle—the engine still ticking. If someone was lingering after the crash, then maybe they had wiped everything down before leaving.

Eddie called out to him. 'Take a look at this.'

Royce found the Sergeant around the back of the hatchback, staring into the open boot. The spare tyre was missing, and the well where it should be kept had been reworked into a square roughly a meter long and wide. It was a dirty job, clods of solder betraying the hasty seams. Eddie reached in and unfurled a carpet tacked to the rear section of the floor. The extended tyre-well was suddenly hidden. Royce pressed down on the thick shag and it sank inwards when enough pressure was applied.

'If it was full,' Eddie said. 'You wouldn't even notice.'

'Full of what, though?' Royce asked.

The station phone rang. He heard McIntyre walking around inside, his steps heavy on the floorboards like the fall of a judge's gavel. He had a bad habit of wearing non-issue footwear on the job, steel-toe, the fronts scuffed bone white. Royce wondered how he could ever sneak up on a perp in those things.

Eddie leant into the boot and the suspension groaned with the extra weight. Something was pressed up against the rear-interior, stuck in the crack between the carpet and

back seat. He tugged it free. It was a small book, the spine cracked and cover bare. *Ha-Avodah Shebalev* was written on the first page. The rest was filled with tight columns of words and numbers.

Eddie squinted as he turned the pages. ‘A bible?’

Two thoughts arose in Royce’s mind—the lounge-room of Rose’s grandmother, and the necklace they had found. ‘Where’s the jewellery?’ Royce asked. ‘The piece we found in the scrub?’

‘Storage. My office. Why?’

Royce headed up into the station. He found McIntyre in the shift office, talking on the phone. The voice on the other end was high-pitched, distressed.

McIntyre covered the receiver. ‘Woah, mate. Where’s the fire?’

Royce hurried into Eddie’s office, and retrieved the necklace from the evidence cabinet. It was sealed in a bag, blood smeared across the clear plastic. Royce couldn’t help but think of the red paint scratched into the front of the hatchback outside.

Eddie was waiting for him in the shift office when he returned. Royce sat down at his desk and flipped a file to the blank side. Using a pen he began to draw an upside-down triangle across the blank surface, the Sergeant lingering over his shoulder, watching the whole process unfold.

He positioned the evidence bag so the damaged pendant intersected the drawing. Lying on top of each other now, the two triangles formed a six-point star. Royce’s scalp began to prickle.

‘The book’s a Jewish prayer collection,’ Royce said.

Eddie stood up straight. He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a heavy sigh. ‘It’s our girl, isn’t it?’

Mill Road was lined with lopsided utes and 4WDs, the working vehicles angled into the firebreak that ran the length of bitumen. Farrow parked at the back of the row and headed towards the mill on foot. His shirt grew damp with sweat as he moved. The sky was cloudless today, but still the air hung hot and heavy across the fields like a smothering hand.

He found the millers gathered outside Wayne's demountable office. Some of the local farmers were with them, and they were dressed in stained overalls, shorts, singlets. Hollister, the oldest fitter and turner still working, stumbled out onto the road and tried to talk to anyone who would listen. 'G'day, Will,' he said, bringing his face close, the capillaries in his nose broken. 'How you been?'

Farrow pushed his way past the man and towards the front of the crowd.

Pete was standing nearby, a lit cigarette nailed between his lips.

'Any word?' Farrow asked.

Pete shook his head. 'Wayne's on the phone now.'

The men behind them sucked on thinly rolled smokes and drank black coffee from styrofoam cups. Nervous laughter occasionally broke the chatter. Depending on how things went today, the farmers and workers could be in for a rough couple of months. If the mill went on strike, then there was nowhere to send the cane, and the fresh product couldn't be held forever.

After a few long minutes, Wayne emerged from his office with Harry following close behind. He took up position at the head of the crowd and the murmur of voices slowly simmered down. 'It's official,' Wayne said. 'Paperwork's gone through.'

The crowd jeered. One voice rose above the sound, 'Fuck 'em.'

Wayne quieted the men with a raised hand. 'It's not the end of the line. Not yet, anyway. But we've been left with no choice. As of now, we're on strike.'

So the company came through then—the mill was sold. Farrow tried to understand why anyone would want the place in its current shape. In his opinion Wayne should be happy about the sale. The shitheap was likely to be another manager's problem now.

Wayne took off his glasses, continued. 'I know how these big-shots work. They don't give a rat's about people like us. Never have and never will. The only people looking out for the workers and the farmers are the folks right here. The people who know the Well and understand what she needs.' Wayne scanned the crowd. His eyes lingered on Farrow. 'And we're not gonna let anyone leave us in the lurch. I have it on good authority that the new owners want to scale things back even more. They want to cut wages and shifts to near nothing. So we got to act fast and stick together. If we stay strong on the strike, then they will be forced to sell. Maybe to someone who actually gives a damn. Big companies like this won't risk losing a cent, so we gotta make sure they do. This is our home. Without the mill, the fields mean nothing. Without the mill, the Well means nothing.'

Applause from the crowd rang out around them. Pete dropped his cigarette, and stomped it out with a boot.

Wayne had to yell for the men to hear him. 'We're getting some strong support on this one, guys. The Painters and Dockers up in Brisbane, the trade unions, they all understand what we're going through. And I promise you right now that, if you stick by us, you will be looked after. No matter how long it takes.'

The men were aimless after Wayne's speech, unsure of what to do now they were free from work. Not just for today, but maybe for months. Most of them left for home or an early schooner at the pub, while others lingered in the grassless lot by the mill's entrance.

An older guy in overalls peeled away from the group and approached Farrow by the road's edge. He offered him a drink from his beat-up flask. 'Been a good while,' the guy said.

Farrow knew the man's freckled face, but couldn't recall a name. That's how it was for most of the millers. Farrow was happy to work side-by-side with them, but he rarely crossed their paths in town, nor would he sit with them at the pub. Mostly they couldn't handle his quiet nature, and they would often squirm with discomfort as he sat for long moments in perfect stillness.

'What do you reckon about today?' Farrow said.

The guy took a long drink. 'Mate, seen this kind of malarkey more times than I can remember. You wait and see. If we hold out, things will be back to normal soon enough.'

Farrow glanced over at the demountable steps. Wayne was nowhere to be seen, but Harry was sitting on the bottom rung, talking to Wayne's nephew in hushed tones. The kid shifted his weight from foot to foot, thumb probing the bruised skin around his eye.

'You ever train these days?' the guy asked. 'You know, for old time's sake.'

Farrow shook his head. 'Not for a long time now.'

'Damn shame, that is. I remember your bout with Wildman Wallace. Fucking brutal, mate. He didn't even stand a chance.'

Farrow had started boxing as a teenager, mostly at his father's behest. Like a lot of boys growing up around the Well, Farrow had encountered his fair share of schoolyard scrapes. When he was Nicole's age, a couple of older boys had started giving him hell in class one day. They said he was a poofter, and that his father was a drunk and wife beater. When Farrow finally confronted them in the schoolyard, one of the boys king-hit him from

behind, and the others beat him while he was down. His father started to train him that very same afternoon. He told Farrow, 'It's not a fight if you don't stand a chance. That's just called a thrashing, son.'

'Didn't peg you as a fighting fan,' Farrow said.

The guy laughed. 'Mate, followed you all the way to Brissie in '74. That fight with the Hammer was a rort. Ref didn't have a clue. It's a shame it went the way it did. Would've loved to see you go it again. But we all get old, hey?'

Pete wound his way through the dwindling workers, last remains of his hair wild in the hot wind. He nodded towards the older man. 'Fitzie. How you doing?'

The guy took another drink from his flask. 'Well, guess I should get going. Wife's waiting for me at home. Good to see you again, Will. Pete.'

Farrow watched him climb up into a familiar black ute, Fitzie's son Thomas waiting behind the wheel. The vehicle had been modified heavily with a jacked suspension and oversized wheels. Sometimes, after dropping his old man off at work, Thomas would rev the engine and then squeal up and down Mill Road like a hoon.

Pete lit up another cigarette. He cupped the flame with a hand. 'You remember what we spoke about at the pub?'

Farrow said he did.

'My place, around six.' He dropped the dead match. 'Don't park out front.'

Nicole dragged the bag out from under her bed and dropped it onto the mattress above, the woven calico filling her nostrils with the dusty scent of an approaching storm. Her mother had given her the bag on her first day of school, to carry her books and pencils on the walk home. And for a small while it did just that. But now it only hid her secrets.

She sat down on the floor and emptied the bag. Carefully she arranged the items in a row from smallest to biggest—a shot glass with a naked woman painted on it, a curling polaroid of a young boy, a packet of cigarettes, and now the ivory brush. One by one she held each in her palm, and an unfamiliar pressure began to grow in the pit of her stomach.

Pete answered the front door in a plain undershirt and rugby shorts, paint stains across both.

‘Hoping it was you. About to get started.’

Farrow stepped past him into the hall. A row of shoes were lined up against the wall and it was more than any one family could need. Most of them were dirt slicked work boots.

‘You mind?’ Pete said. ‘Missus is out with the kids, but she’ll still kill me if we scuff the place up.’

The two of them padded down the hall into the front lounge. The room, like the rest of the house, had the distinct touch of Pete’s wife—floral rugs lay beneath laced curtains, the colours of each dominated by pastel shades. Farrow greeted the men one by one as he moved around the room, then took a beer from the esky and sat down.

The men quieted around him. A stranger was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, his hair the same stone grey as the suit he wore. And, despite the growing humidity of the evening, he didn’t seem to have a bead of sweat on him.

Pete checked his watch. ‘Guess we better get started then. I’m sure most of you want to get home, so I’ll cut straight to it. Today was a travesty. We knew the strike was coming, but it’s still a fucking shame we have to cop the worst of it.’

Johnson spoke up from the lounge. He was young for a miller, only seventeen. But he worked hard and didn’t let anyone give him grief, especially about his dark skin or distant Kanaka blood. ‘Wayne said we were getting paid for the missed shifts. Doesn’t matter about the strike.’

Pete shook his head. 'The money's just not there mate. There's no strike fund. Wayne's whole plan is riding on another buyer coming out of nowhere. But the place has been on the skids for too long now. Trust me. I hear this stuff straight from the horse's mouth.'

'Why would he lie?' Johnson asked. A few of the other men grunted in agreement.

Pete glanced across the room towards the grey-suited stranger. The man took a long cigarette from out his jacket pocket, nodded.

'Look,' Pete said. 'I don't know the ins-and-outs of it all, but the bottom line is clear. Wayne's holding out for nothing. He's putting our homes and families at risk. I don't know about you, but I can't afford to be losing more paycheques.'

Farrow sipped his beer. The millers didn't seem convinced and he couldn't really blame them. Wayne had been pushing the strike as a positive for months now. But Farrow was willing to hear Pete out, see what cards he was dealing. If things didn't feel right he could simply fold his hand.

The grey-suited stranger exhaled smoke through his nostrils. He started for the front of the room and Pete quickly moved out of his way.

'My name is Anders,' the man said. Farrow tried to place his accent. South-African maybe. 'I represent a large development company based in Brisbane, with offices in both Melbourne and Sydney. The same company that today bought the Caleb's Well sugar mill. I know most of you are hesitant about the positives of such a purchase. If you listen to what I have to say, however, I think your mind might be changed about our intentions. As a company we do not wish to harm the longevity of the mill, despite what Wayne Hastings will tell you. Our purchase was undertaken as a long-term investment. We hope to both improve the mill's standards, and bring it into line with our rivals up North. But we cannot do this without workers. That is why you are all here today.'

Pete wiped his brow with the bottom of his undershirt, pale gut exposed briefly. This whole thing was a gambit for him. If the men were sour about what was said today, and word got back to Wayne or Harry, then Pete's job would be dusted. And as Farrow knew first hand, word was quick to spread through the Well.

'Why us?' Farrow asked.

Anders pointed towards Pete. 'Your friend suggested all of you. He said you were the best at what you did. And I believe, as does the company, that those who excel at certain positions should be given the opportunity to work. Under our management there will be no unfair shift changes. No more delegations to those with seniority. Instead, workers who prove themselves will be appropriately awarded.'

Farrow nodded. He knew his old man would be turning in his grave if he saw his son supporting a break-meet, but it all made sense to him. You should be paid for your work, not your years in service. It meant someone like him would get more shifts, more pay.

Anders continued. 'As you can see, there are not many of you here today. That will not hinder current production, however. Pete has informed me that the mill has been running on a skeleton crew for some time now. Although we will be continuing this approach temporarily, we do wish to expand in the future. As I already said, we consider the mill an investment. We want to help build this town into something bigger, into something better. But we can't afford to lose money or time with a needless strike, and neither can the local farmers. It will be tough with such small numbers. But with your help, we can keep the mill running and begin our journey forwards.'

'You don't have to worry about Wayne either,' Pete said. 'He won't have much of a say in things.'

Anders nodded. 'As soon as a few issues are settled at head-office, Wayne will no longer be in charge. Pete here has shown great initiative in his planning, and I am sure he will

fill the position with much care and skill. Undoubtedly this is a tough decision for all of you. And I understand that it may cause stress among your friends and family. Therefore, as a company, we are offering double pay for the first month of work to all those who help us with the initial transition.'

The men started whispering between themselves, their faces red and wide-eyed. A few nodded and stared into their foamy beers.

'When are you starting the place up again?' Johnson asked.

Anders clasped his hands in front of him. 'Monday.'

The whispers grew louder.

Pete made his way through the gathering and over to Farrow. He nudged him with an elbow. 'There you go, mate. Good as gold. Knew we'd win them over.'

He watched as Anders lit up another thin cigarette at the front of the room. 'Sure,' Farrow said. 'Good as gold.'

Royce woke suddenly in the night.

He sat up and the movement stirred Anna from sleep, her soft snores turning into a groan. She reached for his forearm in the darkness, and Royce felt her cold fingers contracting unconsciously, almost as if to hold him there.

He crawled out of bed and headed for the spare room. Stacked against the walls inside were boxes of books, fiction mostly, and Royce began to unpack them one by one. For as long as he could remember, both his parents had been avid readers. When his mother was in hospital during those last days, Royce and his father would bring her heavy shopping bags filled with second-hand books from the local op-shop. She would work her way through them by week's end, and they would trade them back to the store for credit. When she finally passed away, Royce's father gave him the very few she had saved. Most of them were pulp westerns falling apart at the spine, or dime-store crime stories.

Royce was still fresh in the academy at the time, and he didn't really have the drive to read for pleasure. But after graduation he began to work his way through them, revisiting each book at least once a year. And although he told himself he enjoyed the predictable characters and poorly planned stories, he knew he was really searching for whatever it was that had led her to keep them.

Out in the kitchen, he took a beer from the fridge. Through the window above the sink he could see the blackness of night, relentless and seemingly endless. The nightmare stirred again at the edge of his mind. For a brief moment he saw an unlit alleyway in Fortitude Valley, her frail body hidden among the rubbish and boxes. She was too young. No more

than a girl. Even on a night so dark the beating she had endured was clear, the skin around her wrists raw, her delicate forehead split open above the eyes. What if it wasn't you who found her that night? What if you had decided to ignore the call?

In the harsh kitchen light, Royce checked the clock above the stove. It was still a good way out from dawn. He finished the remainder of his beer and got another from the fridge.

IV

Monday, seven in the morning.

The strikebreakers gathered at the tail end of Little Mill Road, their vehicles parked bumper to bumper in the horseshoe turnaround. Farrow saw Ander's sedan idling behind him in the ute's rear-view mirror. Orchestral music swelled from the open windows. Farrow couldn't place it just yet, but something about the man didn't sit right with him. Normally that would be enough to have him walking from a situation as risky as this, but he needed the money and he needed it fast.

The first vehicle rolled out onto the bitumen at half-past the hour. The driver headed towards the mill via the curving rear entry, and Farrow followed close behind. Wind skirted the burnt fields beyond the road, colliding with a growing northerly, and the reaction was immediate. A row of dust devils appeared briefly before tearing apart under their own wild rotation, ash and soil raining earthward again.

Pete was waiting for him by the generators out back, and he knocked on the driver's side glass with a knuckle. 'Reckon you should take a look at this, mate,' he said.

Farrow followed his friend onto the silent work floor. Through the open front he could see millers and their utes gathered on the road, but it was nothing like the Brisbane strikes the news covered at the beginning of the year. There were no signs or placards. Just familiar faces staring back at him.

Wayne was at the front of the crowd, leaning against the bonnet of a spew-green Falcon. A police officer sat inside the vehicle and he was slowly making his way through a newspaper. He was familiar to Farrow—McInnis, maybe.

‘Word must’ve got out,’ Pete said. ‘Thought we’d have at least a day or two.’

‘Who called the cops?’ Farrow asked.

Someone spoke up behind them. Farrow turned to see Anders approaching across the mill floor. His suit was a different colour than last time, but still the same impeccable cut. ‘I let the police know what was happening,’ he said. ‘I was hoping a presence may deter any violence. But I assumed they would send more than one officer.’

‘You tell the trucks to go the back way?’ Farrow said. ‘Delivery guys won’t be happy with this out front.’

Anders nodded. ‘I will tell the farmers immediately. The shipping vehicles should be no concern, however. The former service had close ties to Wayne and seemed very hesitant to do business with me. So I’ve brought in my own people, affiliated with the company.’

Around them, in the heart of the mill, the workers began to disperse, taking up their positions at workstations and conveyor heads. Someone flicked on a power lever and the machines switched over one by one. The hum and grind was still familiar to Farrow even after so many lost shifts. Almost welcome.

‘All right,’ Pete said. ‘Let’s get to work then.’

Across town, Nicole left the stony shoulder of the road, and followed the dog as he clambered down the dry riverbed.

When the rains were good, the banks of the river would sometimes overflow and fill the nearby fields. The floodwater would merge with the roiling pull and the ebb of the river would widen as it headed back to the inlets, eventually joining the ocean once again. Millers would spend their weekends angling the brown torrent for perch that swam upstream from the estuaries. And Nicole would often come down and watch them with Boo, the dog going wild with the cheers of the men.

Further down the wash a wooden causeway bridged the two banks like a felled tree. Nicole sat in the shade below. One time she had found the remains of a possum down here, body rigid, clawed hands gripping a support beam. The heat had dried out the patched fur of the animal and she had been able to see the bones beneath the rot.

‘You hungry, Boo?’ she asked as she scratched the dog’s chin. The animal woke from his doze, whined and whipped the ground with his tail. ‘Yeah. Me too,’ she said.

Taking a shortcut through a field of freshly planted cane, they made their way across town towards the local grocery store. Nicole left Boo tied up outside in the shade, and the bell above the door rang out as she headed inside.

A pair of fans circulated the stale air above the counter, humming either side of a sign screwed into the tin wall—*Try the Egger Deluxe, Queensland's biggest and best egg salad sandwich*. She lowered her eyes and started towards the fridges at the back of the store. Besides an older man browsing the magazines near the entrance, she was the only customer here today. Still, she had to be careful.

Nicole worked her way down the aisles until she reached a shelf lined with wrapped lollies and chocolates. She crouched down low behind a display rack, grabbed what she could, and hid them in her underwear and socks.

On the way back to the front door, she grabbed a packet of salt and vinegar chips, and dropped them onto the counter. She then laid out a row of coins, taken from the house she had visited the other day.

The blonde woman behind the till lowered her paperback. 'Is this your lunch?'

Nicole's hands began to shake. Maybe the woman had seen her hide the lollies. 'Yeah,' she said. 'That's all.'

'Your father know you're eating this junk?' she asked. 'Where is he? Work?'

'You know my dad?'

The old man by the front window licked his finger with a sandpaper tongue, and turned to the last page. He carelessly returned the magazine to the rack, then left through the glass door.

The woman leant across the counter. Up close her breath smelt like milky tea. 'My name's Mariah,' she said. 'You must be Nicole.'

Nicole finished her egg-salad sandwich in the back room of the grocery store, the fold out card-table unsteady beneath her elbows.

Mariah sat down opposite, and passed the girl a bottle of creaming soda from the shop floor. 'Must've been starving.'

She popped the cap. 'Thank you.'

A pipe dripped beneath the nearby sink and the overflow left the linoleum slick with moisture. Nicole could feel the insides of her shoes growing damp, a crack running through the middle of the tread.

Mariah mindlessly fingered her French braid. 'Don't really say much, do you?'

Nicole slurped from the bottle.

The woman continued. 'You wagging?'

She had never liked school. She always felt like she was on the outside of the other students, looking in on them. 'I guess.'

'I won't dob you in,' Mariah said. 'Can't blame you. Didn't like school much around here either.'

'You grew up in the Well?' the girl asked.

Boo began to whine outside the shop. The bell above the door rang out as someone entered the store, and heavy footfalls approached the counter a moment later.

'Give me a sec,' Mariah said. She disappeared back out onto the shop floor, and when she spoke again her voice was muted. 'I told you not to come here.'

Nicole sipped her drink, listened.

A man responded, his voice deep, words almost running together. 'Need some things. Please. I have the money.'

'All right,' Mariah said. 'But be quick about it.'

Nicole stood up and made her way towards the open doorway. A man stood before the counter, tall and gangly like a teenager. But his cheeks were dark with black whiskers. Nicole watched him load cans into a cloth backpack, and he turned briefly to reveal a knife on his leather belt.

‘That all?’ Mariah said.

The man’s face was expressionless. ‘You got ice?’

‘Ran out this morning.’

‘What about lime powder?’

Mariah shook her head. ‘What you see. You know that.’

The man glanced at Nicole standing in the doorway to the backroom. His eyes were dark and watery.

‘Okay then,’ he said. ‘Just this.’

As he left through the front door with the bag on his back, the dog let out a final sound, then settled again in the shade.

Royce found the pub quiet for a lunchtime. The few men sitting around the floating bar were ancient, faces stained with the bitter look of a line-up, cigarette and schooner pinched in the same shaking hand.

Royce rapped his knuckles on the bar and the publican looked up at him.

‘Must be the new fella then,’ he said.

‘How’d you know?’ Royce asked.

The publican laughed. ‘Mate, take a look around. Think you look like a local?’

Royce nodded. ‘This your place?’

He shook his head, a curl of red hair sliding across his sweaty brow. ‘In charge, but. You wanna drink? On the house of course, for an officer like yourself.’

Someone broke on the pool table at the back of the pub, the porcelain crack loud.

Royce turned to see a man behind the cue. He was wearing a sleeveless t-shirt and there was a muscle bound kangaroo flexing across the front, his gut stretching the marsupial’s long face. He leant down across the felt again and lined up another shot. Briefly he met Royce’s eyes over the drop of the cue.

Royce turned back to the publican. He showed him the photocopied image of Rose.

‘Ever see this girl in here? Maybe recently?’

The belongings in the hatchback had cinched Rose as the driver. But Royce had to pin her last whereabouts, or maybe find out where she was staying now. After Madeline had mentioned miller connections the other day, he had wanted to hit the mill first up. But Eddie

had suggested the local pub. Same kind of crowd, but the drink left the regulars willing to talk.

‘Reckon so,’ the publican said. ‘Can’t remember when, but I remember her. Good looking lass.’

‘Recall anyone she was with?’ Royce asked. ‘A boyfriend. Maybe some millers.’

The publican wiped his running nose with the wash-rag. ‘Look mate, when it’s busy in here I can’t scratch my arse let alone keep tabs on who’s with who. Only remember the face cause I had to card her. Barely looks fifteen let alone old enough to drink’

Royce returned the photo to his pocket. ‘If she comes back though...’

He nodded. ‘Actually, before you go mate. Just wanted to say that I saw you out there the other night. Punch like that, you could make a killing in the bantams. Maybe heavier if you got some grub in you. You got the look for it. Right kind of stare. Wouldn’t be the first fighter to come out of here.’ He pointed to a row of framed photographs on the wall. One in particular stood out to Royce, a teenager in gym-trunks, boxing gloves raised high. The face was oddly familiar to him.

‘I’ll keep that in mind,’ he said.

The old-timers down the other end of the bar told Royce something similar when he pressed them about Rose. The photo looked familiar, but nothing more.

One of the men, a balding Sicilian with a stroke victim smile, offered Royce a cigarette from a packet on the counter. ‘Not a smoker, hey?’ he said, accent thick. ‘Smart kid.’ His eyes were locked on the television bolted to the roof, and he missed the ashtray by his side. The fallen embers sizzled in a heady pint. ‘Where’s Eddie today? Haven’t seen that bludger in yonkers. Bet he’s sitting on his arse doing nothing.’

When Royce had left base earlier this morning, Eddie was on the phone. He was calling some of the closest stations again, trying to see if Rose had anything to red flag her.

But there was nothing. From what they could tell, Rose had spent most of her life in the Well with her head down and hands clean.

‘You know Eddie,’ Royce said. ‘Working hard.’

The Sicilian cracked up, his laugh throaty and smoke ravaged. ‘You hear that. A copper working hard.’ The other men around him joined in.

They were still laughing when Royce started for the rear of the pub. In his peripheral he saw the man at the pool table chalking his cue. Royce took a detour towards him and he shifted his weight awkwardly, then started for the bathroom.

The game was an old one and Royce knew it well.

Outside he jogged down the verandah stairs, and around the side of the building. The route towards the back was tight. A row of rusted kegs lined the pub wall and a wire fence ran opposite. Cardboard boxes turning to pulp carpeted the floor. The sight of it all knocked the air from him. He remembered the alleyway as it was that night, the bloody dent where her head had met the ground.

Someone began to groan behind the pub and the sound was panicked. Royce forced himself through the gap. As he slid along the fence his uniform pants caught on a loose wire barb and the material tore behind the knee, scratching his flesh.

The groaning grew louder. ‘Shit. Shit. Shit.’

Royce turned the corner to find a group of rubbish bins against the wall. Their lids were open and the raw smell was overwhelming—a mix of old eggs and stale piss.

The guy from the pub was struggling headfirst through a high-set window above. He saw Royce coming for him. ‘Fuck sake.’

Before he could pull himself back inside, Royce grabbed the collar of his shirt and yanked him through. He tumbled out of his grip and onto the ground, face colliding with the cement. Royce leant down to help him up. ‘I feel like you’re avoiding me.’

The man rolled over onto his back and threw a punch. The hit was weak, but it was enough to surprise Royce. He lost his balance and stumbled against the rancid bins. Without a beat, the man forced himself up and legged it, scrambling over the wire fence and into the open scrubland next door.

Royce quickly regained himself and began to follow. He gripped the chain-link with his fingers and hauled himself over to the other side. Across the open yard he saw the man running full bore towards a farmhouse, a field of cane lying beyond. Royce sprinted after him, but it was too late. By the time he arrived at the cane the man had disappeared into the brake, thick stalks swallowing his shape.

Back at base, Royce checked the damage in the bathroom mirror. The corner of his lip was split and swollen. Mottles of blood stained his shirt. He dabbed at the dark spots with a damp cloth, but they only grew lighter. You already knew they were never coming out, he thought. Stains like that rarely did.

Royce found Eddie waiting in the shift office. 'Look at you. Scrub up well.'

'Feels worse than it looks,' Royce said as he prodded his lip. 'Much worse.'

'Too bad about the shirt.'

Sometime during the scuffle the buttonhole of Royce's uniform had been torn. The flap of material hung loose against his chest like an unfurled flag. 'Guess I'll have to invoice him.'

'You catch the guy's name?'

'Yeah, we both sat down and had a good old yarn. Just before he punched me square in the face.'

‘You’re a cheeky bugger, aren’t you?’

Royce sat down at his desk and took out his notepad. ‘Spoke to the publican. He said the guy was a regular. Lynch, Andy. Drives a beat-up Toyota. Checked, but I couldn’t find it in the lot.’

Eddie rearranged his belt, sighed.

‘You know him then?’ Royce asked.

‘Andrew Lynch,’ Eddie said. ‘Been in the Well for maybe a year or so now. Works here and there as a mechanic for Norm, but nothing permanent. Had the unfortunate luck of running into him a few times now. I know his address, so maybe he’s due for a visit.’

‘Seems a bit soft for a pub fight.’

‘Mate, your face says otherwise. But you’re right for the most part. He’s more observant, if you catch my drift.’

Royce had to think about it. ‘A peeper?’

Eddie nodded. ‘Had a few complaints about someone looking through windows at night, watching people as they shower. Walker picked him up coming out of a backyard. He had a camera on him, but no film. So it wasn’t like we had the evidence. Reckons he was taking nature shots but left the roll at home. You know, at near midnight in the dark.’

‘Might not have been him then.’

‘Doubt it,’ Eddie said. ‘Boy clearly loves his bathroom windows.’

They drove out through the foothills and towards the distant ocean, the road running flat through near-endless fields of rangy cattle and sun-browned wild grass. After nearly half-an-hour of driving, a single story farmhouse rose into view.

‘This it?’ Royce said. ‘Looks empty.’

Eddie pulled the LandCruiser over onto the shoulder. ‘Nah, mate. Been a fella living here long as I can remember. Lynch rents the granny flat out back.’

Royce looked over the house. The windows were shuttered close and a torn tarp covered the storm damaged roof. ‘What kind of person lives here?’ he said.

Eddie laughed. ‘The Well kind, mate.’

They made their way up the verandah stairs, careful not to put a stray foot through the rotting wood. An ancient man answered the front door and he spoke to them through the flyscreen.

‘Looking for Andrew Lynch,’ Royce said. ‘He in?’

The man had both hands on the doorknob, as if expecting them to push their way inside. ‘Don’t know. Haven’t seen him.’

‘You mind if we have a look down behind the house?’ Eddie said. ‘Check out where he’s been staying?’

He thought it over. ‘Just don’t touch anything, all right? I’ll know. I’ll know if you’ve touched anything.’

They made their way around the side of the house through an overgrown driveway, the grass littered with rusting farm equipment and crates of jars and bottles. Something touched Royce’s leg as he walked and he looked down to see a huge rat disappearing into the clumped weeds.

‘Jesus,’ he said, and leant down to tuck his pants into his shoes.

The granny flat was a good distance from the house and Eddie and him were both drenched in sweat by the time they arrived. As Royce expected, they found the place empty. ‘What now?’ he asked.

Eddie cupped his ear. ‘You hear that? I think it’s coming from inside. Sounds like someone needs our help?’

Royce listened, but heard nothing. He watched as Eddie leant his shoulder against the flimsy door and pushed, grunting through his nose with the effort. The lock, like the flat itself, was cheap and the bolt slipped out easily. The door yawned open on its hinges and collided with the wall.

‘Bloody hell,’ Eddie said as he regained his balance. ‘Guess I was wrong. Might as well take a look though, hey?’

‘Don’t beat yourself up,’ Royce said as he made his way inside. ‘Could happen to anyone.’

The interior of the granny flat was near empty, every surface scrubbed clean. A lone wooden bed sat against the far wall and it overlooked a television set on top of a chest of drawers. In the cupboards beneath the kitchenette sink, Royce found a single bowl and spoon, a couple of cans of spaghetti with faded labels.

As Eddie began to sort through the clothes in the dresser, Royce checked the bed. From what he could feel there was nothing hidden inside the thin mattress. But visible between the wooden slats was a suitcase. Royce dragged it out into the middle of the floor, and undid the latches.

Inside were two shoeboxes. He opened the first to find it full of photographs, all of them women. Most were candid shots taken from afar and a different female featured in each. Some were of women preparing dinner, others were of them showering or in their underwear. Royce flipped through them all looking for a familiar face, but he couldn’t see Rose in any. Towards the bottom of the box he found a collection of yellowing polaroids, most of them nudes. The girls in these stood awkwardly against a black background, staring into the

camera flash with blank expressions and glassy eyes. They were young enough to leave Royce's stomach churning.

In the second shoebox he found women's underwear. They varied in size and style and many featured a fruit pattern like strawberries or apples. Some were stained with dark blotches that looked like blood.

'Royce, mate,' Eddie said. 'Look what I got.'

He stood up to see the Sergeant holding a wad of cash, pulled from one of the drawers.

'Reckon he might be coming back for this?' Eddie said.

Royce looked down at the suitcase. 'I don't know. But if he does, we have to haul him in. And we have to do it fast.'

Nicole looked herself over in the wardrobe mirror. She could see the full shape of her body in the streaming moonlight, skin pale, almost as if it were bloodless. It left the rough nubs of hair growing beneath her arms and along her crotch looking stark.

She traced the shape of her nipple with a thumb. The soft skin around had recently begun to expand and grow puffy, and it was tender to the touch. A week ago, when she was sorting through the dirty washing for something to wear, she'd found a bra belonging to her mother. It was far too big for her slight frame, but she had taken it anyway. The material had absorbed Molly's perfume and sweat, and when Nicole brought it close to her face and breathed deeply, she tasted her lingering scent at the back of her throat.

Someone knocked at the bedroom door. Nicole slipped on her cotton nightie, and sat down on the bed next to the sleeping dog.

Her father came in with a plate. 'Sorry if I woke you,' he said. 'I heated you something up.'

Nicole rubbed the bridge of Boo's snout, his hot breath on her hand.

Farrow put the food down on the bedside table. 'I can always sleep somewhere else. You know, if you like.'

When she was younger, Nicole would often sleep in the big bed with her mother while Farrow was at the pub or the mill. She had tried to doze in there recently, but she couldn't stop tossing and turning, the bed far too large without Molly beside her. Nicole had started to wonder if that same terrible feeling was the reason her father spent his nights roaming the halls. His days napping on the couch.

‘Where were you this morning?’ he asked. ‘You were gone before I got up.’

‘Went for a walk with the dog,’ Nicole said.

He eyed the lolly wrappers on her bedside table.

Nicole shrugged. ‘Got them from the grocer’s.’

‘Pay for it yourself did you?’ he asked.

‘The lady who works there gave them to me. Mariah.’

For a long time Farrow was silent. His expression was obscured by shadow and Nicole couldn’t tell if he was watching her or not. ‘Well,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you in the morning.’

As he was closing the door she spoke up. ‘Dad.’

He paused in the half-open doorway.

‘Thanks. For the food.’

Farrow’s face pulled into a smile. He left and once again the girl and the dog were alone.

When he got home, Royce tried to salvage his uniform. The bloody shirt was done for, but the pants would live on with some careful stitching around the tear.

After hanging them back up in the wardrobe, he turned to see Anna watching him from the hallway. She was wearing a singlet above loose track pants and the elastic waist gathered in a lump beneath her bulging stomach. ‘What happened to you?’

‘Shirt’s ruined,’ Royce said as he sat down on the bed. ‘Brand new too. Was chasing a guy at the pub.’

‘Same guy who did that to your face?’

Royce put a hand to the swelling. ‘Part of the job.’

‘Never used to be,’ she said.

Anna was right. Back when Royce was working Brisbane, he made it a priority to take a man down before they landed a hit, often with his baton or a king hit. Footy had left him nimble in a scuffle, and the academy training only helped. But he could never justify the risk. He used to rationalise the violence to himself all the time. You’re not the only one to do it. Almost part of the job description these days.

‘Look, I know you’re not happy—’

Anna cut him off. ‘Shaun’s been waiting for you all day. Just make sure you clean up a little before he sees you.’

Down the hall Royce could hear Shaun playing with his toys. The boy started to call out for him in his singsong voice, the words broken into two distinct syllables, ‘Dah-dah,

dah-dah.’ Royce watched Anna leave the bedroom. She spoke quietly to their son at the other end of the house. ‘Soon, honey. Your daddy’s just busy right now.’

His uniform shirt lay limp across the bed like a skinned pelt. He fingered the torn buttonhole and felt the material tear with pressure.

V

Eddie called him early the next morning.

‘Got a little errand,’ he said. ‘Might help us with the girl. Don’t bother driving in, I’ll pick you up along the way.’

Royce checked the clock above the stove. His shift didn’t start for three hours. ‘Give me at least twenty minutes,’ he said.

Fresh from the shower, Royce climbed up into the passenger side of the LandCruiser. Eddie steered the vehicle back onto the bitumen and towards town. ‘Lip looks a little better.’

‘Swellings gone down a bit,’ Royce said. ‘So I take it you caught a lead last night. Lynch come back home?’

‘Not exactly,’ Eddie said.

‘So just a scenic trip then?’

‘Nah, mate. Getting a second opinion.’

Eddie turned the LandCruiser onto a dirt track marked *Missionary Road*. A slouched milk bar stood on the corner and the sad looking owner was sitting out front, sunburnt legs raised on a milk crate. He waved at them as they passed and Eddie nudged the horn. Headed

now towards the base of the foothills, the suspension began to shake over washouts and jagged stone, the dashboard rattling.

They soon crested a small hill to see a group of identical cottages, knee-high grass swallowing the foundations. Beyond them lay a gabled chapel. The oversized crucifix hung low from the ochre soffit and the face of the nailed Christ was polished smooth by the wind. A printed sign by the door said: *Home of his Grace*. But some joker had spray painted a crude letter D on it, turning *his Grace* into *Dis Grace*.

Eddie parked the LandCruiser out front.

Kids chased a mongrel dog around the foundations of the nearby water tower, and they laughed uproariously as the animal weaved between their legs, tail wagging. An elderly woman watched the children play from the house next door, and her dark features were sun-gnarled. When she saw the two coppers standing outside the chapel, she hocked something thick from the back of her throat, and spat it into the dirt.

‘Where is everybody?’ Royce asked.

Although the question was for Eddie, a voice behind him answered. ‘No offence to present company, but after all that has happened here, police aren’t exactly warmly welcomed.’

Royce turned to see Jacob standing in the doorway of the chapel. The smell of him filled Royce’s nostrils as he drew closer—Brylcreem and an alcohol heavy aftershave.

‘Bad blood is hard to wash out,’ Eddie said.

Jacob nodded. ‘Especially a lifetime’s worth. Shall we go inside?’

The chapel’s interior was spartan. The thick-legged pews were built from long slabs of cracked gum and the carved altar was the only artefact of expense. From the smell of the place, Royce could tell the floors had been recently cleaned with citrus and varnish, the polished wood warping his reflection like a carnival mirror.

A tall man met them at the front of the room, his broad shoulders slumped inside a dress shirt, curly dark hair cut close to the scalp. 'G'day,' he said.

'This is my nephew, Gabe,' Jacob said.

Royce shook the man's hand.

'Gabe's a right good hunter,' Eddie said. 'Learnt it on the job up North. Clearing roo.'

'And pig,' Gabe said, his voice higher and softer than Royce expected. 'Nothing special.'

'Don't be so modest,' Jacob said. 'He holds the record for most tails on a single hunt. Still never bested within the company.'

Gabe ran his finger over a crack in the pew back. 'That was before they gave me the flick, anyhow.'

Royce heard the warble of a crow song outside, clawed feet skittering across the tin roof. The sound tore through his head. Last night was rough and he was paying for it today. He had awoken early morning and struggled to slip back into sleep, the same nightmare treading at the edges of his mind.

'You up for giving us a hand?' Eddie said. 'Pay's rotten, but fresh air's gotta be better than your uncle's gasbagging.'

Gabe looked at Jacob.

The older man smiled.

'Just get my hat,' Gabe said.

As they turned back onto the bitumen from Missionary Road, Gabe spoke up from the back seat. ‘Dad used to talk a lot when he was on the piss,’ he said. ‘Told me about what the cops did to him in lock-up. Back when. You know, before Eddie got here.’

Royce looked at the man in the rear-view mirror.

Gabe rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. He looked out the window at the passing landscape. ‘Thanks for looking after my brother the other night.’

Royce stood by Eddie’s side out on the bitumen, pale dust tracing the wind that skirted the shoulder of the road. Down below them Gabe treaded through the tangled scrub. His body was coiled in a half-crouch and he used his hands to keep balance. Although Royce was only here a week ago, everything seemed unfamiliar in the new light, the spaces wider, the scrubland near endless.

‘You reckon she drove down there?’ Eddie said. ‘Or was she pushed?’

Gabe took off his akubra. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. ‘Dunno. Can tell they weren’t going fast, but. All this here would be torn up worse otherwise.’

Royce thought about the car. You could see glass on the inside. Maybe someone pulled up beside the moving hatchback and smashed the window in. If the person behind the wheel had been injured, they may have lost acceleration and then control, the vehicle drifting down the embankment. Would explain the damage to the front. The approach would be tough at high speed and the second car may have collided.

‘How many officers were out here?’ Gabe said.

Eddie combed his beard with his fingers. ‘Four. Norm came down later on though. So five sets of prints in total.’

‘And then another set leading away,’ Royce said. ‘Owner unknown.’

Gabe scrambled back up the embankment. He dusted the dirt from his shorts. ‘Well, I reckon I got one more.’

‘Headed away from the crash?’ Royce asked.

Gabe let out a sharp breath. ‘Hard to tell. You coppers lack the delicate touch. Tread on bloody near everything.’

Further down the road, in the knots of grass by the bitumen’s edge, a glint of metal caught Royce’s eye. He peeled away from Eddie and Gabe, and made his way closer. In the parched blades he found a hubcap, the metal scratched and heavily dented. Royce turned it over in his hands to reveal *Crown* printed across the front in bold lettering.

He squinted against the sun. On the horizon he saw the mill stack looming, shape almost lost under the billowing smoke. The sight of it was hazy, otherworldly.

Eddie and Gabe were still chatting by the road’s edge as Royce made his way back towards the LandCruiser, hubcap in hand. The other day, when they had first found the hatchback, McIntyre had said the road up top was clear. But if he had missed this, then maybe he had missed more.

Not far from where he found the hubcap, Royce spotted a pair of skid marks on the bitumen. The axle distance between each was short. He followed them until he found the thickest chunks of burnt rubber. A senior officer on highway patrol once told him how this kind of thing worked: ‘You wanna know where they were coming from?’ he had said. ‘Follow the thickest spread of the skid. Always leads the way, mate. Like an arrow.’

Royce signalled for the others to come over.

‘What’s that you got?’ Eddie said.

‘Hubcap.’

Eddie shook his head. ‘Don’t tell me.’

Royce passed it to him. 'Toyota. Just like Lynch. Too bad the publican couldn't remember the make.'

'You reckon it's from the same night?'

'Maybe. If the second car collided, then it could have come loose. If the damage were bad enough, it would explain why they didn't risk driving down.'

Gabe was looking at the road. 'You found skidmarks.'

Royce nodded. 'Looks like they're from a car.'

'But where were they headed?' Eddie asked.

Gabe leant down close to the bitumen. 'No expert on this kind of thing,' he said 'But I reckon they were coming from that way.'

Eddie followed the man's hand, but Royce didn't bother. He already knew Gabe was pointing towards town.

Nicole circled the stunted tree that grew in the far corner of the yard. A wayward root had begun to crack the lip of the road, bitumen pushed upwards by earthbound movements, and the girl balanced on the rise. She tugged a dry branch from the bough and threw it out into the wilted grass. Boo was waiting at the other end of the yard, and he rushed for the splintered limb, picked it up in his mouth, and cantered towards her.

Next door the flyscreen creaked open. She looked up to see Norm easing himself into a chair on the verandah, beer in hand.

She made her way up past Norm's tow-truck, and towards the verandah. He was sitting on the wicker chair overlooking the yard, picking at his big toe with a flick knife. But he quickly stopped when he saw the girl watching him...

The dog whined next door, circled after his own tail, and then settled again in the shade of the carport. A lone fly treaded the damp fur beneath his eyes.

'You've lived here a long time, haven't you?'

Norm nodded. 'Whole life.'

'So you'd know most people in the Well?'

'Course,' Norm said. 'Why you asking?'

Nicole picked at the peeling paint on the balustrade. 'Just a bit worried. A friend of mine from school told me someone broke into her house and took a heap of stuff. Reckons her family is even thinking about moving now.'

Norm sucked at his teeth. 'That's no good. You worried about your friend moving?'

'It's not that,' Nicole said. 'I'm worried it might happen to Dad and me.'

'You're worried that someone might try and get into your place?'

She shook her head. 'Not someone. The same person. My friend told me she saw a man outside her house a couple of days before it happened. She said he looked bad. He had dark skin and curly hair. He even wore a knife on his belt.'

Norm tried to stifle his laugh. 'Come up here, mate. Take a seat.'

Nicole made her way up the stairs. The second wicker chair crackled and bowed even with her slight frame.

'You tell your old man about this?' he asked. 'About how worried you are?'

The girl lowered her eyes to the bare floorboards. She traced the whorls in the wood with a foot, the knots curling slowly inwards until they disappeared completely.

Norm continued. 'I know the fella your friend was talking about. He's weird, but not like that.'

'How can you be sure?' she asked. 'She said he was scary.'

Norm finished his beer. Opened another. 'The guy you're talking about keeps to himself mostly. And his place is far away from here, out near the hills. He's pretty much on the other side of town. So you got nothing to worry about.' He tapped his temple. 'Besides, he's a little slow up here. Not going to bother anyone.'

'So my friend was lying?'

‘Sometimes the guy visits town,’ Norm said. ‘But I doubt he would break into someone’s house and get away with it. Not clever enough for that. So you got nothing to worry about, Nikki. Okay?’

A red Charger pulled up on the road out front of the house, the tall man inside eyeing them from behind the steering wheel. Nicole tried to make his features through the dark windows, but he sped off again before she had the chance.

Back inside the house, Nicole sat on the couch with the dog. The tin roof was searing in the midday light and sweat slicked her forehead. If she were to leave now, she would wear the worst of it. Besides, there was no guarantee she could get back before her father arrived home from work.

She would have to wait until tomorrow morning to make the trip across town.

Farrow took lunch outside. He sat on the flimsy steps leading up to the demountable office and sipped his steaming tea. On the road ahead he saw the striking millers. There were fewer today, but the blockade still remained. They were leaning against their vehicles, smoking half-stubbed cigarettes and drinking beer from an esky. Every so often Farrow would catch one of them looking his way as they got another drink, and their sunburnt face was pursed, as if tasting something sour.

Johnson emerged from the din of the mill, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lips. He joined Farrow on the steps. ‘Gotta light?’

Farrow shook his head.

‘Ah, shit. Bad for me anyway, hey?’ He took the cigarette from his mouth and returned it to the packet. ‘You know what? Sell a pack of smokes with an attached matchbox, and I reckon you’d make a killing. Should talk to Bluey about it. See if I can get in on that shit he sells from under the counter.’

Laughter rose from the bitumen. One of the strikers was moving his cupped hand up-and-down in front of his groin, as if he were masturbating. Another threw an empty beer can towards the demountable office, but the wind shunted it sideways.

‘They’re dying off,’ Farrow said.

Johnson nodded. ‘Can’t say I blame them. Wouldn’t want to stand around in this heat either.’

It honestly didn’t matter how many men there were. As long as they kept the front entrance blocked, the mill would struggle. The rear road was thin and crumbling, and the

farmers couldn't get their trucks through without risk, their tyres nearly slipping off each perilous side of the firebreak. They had to take the route slowly and it killed any chance of a quick turnover.

'Trucks still aren't really coming,' Farrow said. 'I don't know what Anders intends on doing, but he needs to do it soon.'

'Overheard him talking to Pete this morning. Reckons something should be sorted by week's end. Apparently he's calling in some pretty big favours.'

Farrow finished his tea. The silhouette of the mill stretched out across the work yard before him, and the smokestack was like a sundial hand. The shadow's arc was almost imperceptible, moving from the demountable to the road, but Farrow knew it to be there. Tallying the hours, the minutes, the seconds.

'What do you reckon?' Farrow asked. 'About all this?'

Johnson crossed his arms. His dark skin was beading sweat. 'Don't know. Glad to be working again though. Maybe not as much as my Mrs, but glad enough.'

Out on the road somebody switched on a radio. Two voices emerged, both of them flat and emotionless.

...this warts and all book has not only laid the blame on Sydney cops and government officials, but also our own local constabulary. According to sources, a high profile Sydney detective worked with Queensland cops to murder a local prostitute and vice queen. Unsurprisingly, this murdered woman had a history with the Queensland police. She had gone on record in the past, talking about their criminal behaviour and corruption. And I've got a feeling she was ready to talk again, that's why...

Now, I don't meant to interrupt you, but before we start casting any stones, it's important to consider the facts here...

One of the millers switched between stations. Country music began to blare out of the ute's speakers, the sound a mess by the time it reached Farrow on the demountable stairs.

'Think Anders was telling the truth?' he asked.

'About getting the mill good again?' Johnson said. 'Dunno, mate. I'd like to think so. But I don't know if the odds are in his favour.'

Farrow stood up and rolled his shoulders to loosen the muscles—a habit left over from his boxing days. One of the millers leered at him from the road. He drew a finger across his neck to the laughter of those around.

'Yeah,' Farrow said. 'I think he might be in for a fight.'

They dropped Gabe back at the Squats before nightfall.

Eddie took out his wallet and passed him some scrunched up notes through the open driver's side window. 'Thanks for today,' he said. 'Big help.'

Gabe counted the cash. 'Slave wages, mate.'

'Yeah, well. Docked for being a smart arse.'

Eddie brought the LandCruiser around in a u-turn, and hammered the horn as he accelerated. From out behind one of the nearby homes, a group of children appeared in the dusty square. They chased the vehicle down Missionary Road for as long as their little bodies would allow, slowly falling away one by one.

On the way back to base, Eddie stopped in at the local grocer's. He returned to the parked 4WD and passed Royce a can of creaming soda and an egg-salad sandwich, the bread soggy with mayonnaise.

'The footprints,' Royce said. 'So there was a second pair?'

Eddie unwrapped his food. 'Mate, it's dinner time.'

'If one of them belonged to Lynch, then what about the other pair? Who's the second man?'

'I'll give Norm a call in the morning, all right? See if he knows anything about the people Lynch ran with. But don't stress, mate. We'll get this. Haven't let one slip through my fingers yet.'

In the dense weave of grass across the road, a black snake propped itself upright, its darted head visible in the waning light. Before his transfer to the Well, people had warned

Royce about walking through the cane without boots. Apparently black snakes would hide in the brake, and if someone disturbed them they would give chase for kilometres, giving up only once they'd completely lost sight of their prey. Royce couldn't help but think there was something to admire in that.

'Keep in touch with your old man?' Eddie asked.

'Fair bit. You know him?'

He nodded. 'Academy around the same time. He graduated before me, but I remember Vic well. Saw him drink a couple of Yank sailors under the table one time after they told him Aussies couldn't hold their piss. By the end of the night he had two other cadets standing either side of him, holding him up. But still he was sinking those beers like they were water.'

'Sounds like him,' Royce said. 'Never did anything half-arsed. But things were a little different after his accident. Struggled for a few years to get back to his old ways.'

'How about you? You faring okay?'

'I'm fine. Why?'

Eddie took a bite out of his sandwich. He spoke with his mouth full. 'You need time off? You just tell me, okay? You wanna change to call outs for a bit, or even something else, I'm more than happy to swap you with Walker or McIntyre. Just let me know.'

Royce threw the remains of his food out the window, his appetite gone. 'Guess you read my file then.'

'Didn't need to,' Eddie said. 'Good cop like you sent out here? Seen it before. Either you pissed off someone, or you cracked on the job. After spending time with you, I'm guessing it's not the latter.' Eddie turned in his seat. 'But I need to know you can follow through with this.'

The collar of Royce's shirt was growing damp with sweat and he felt the beads working their way down between his shoulder blades. He wiped his neck with a hand. 'I pinned something on a cop,' Royce said.

'Let me guess. Taking bribes from bookies? Was the big thing back when I was working Brisbane.'

Royce shook his head. 'Murder.'

Eddie wrapped the remains of his food. 'Did he actually do it?'

'I think so,' Royce said. 'I had a witness and everything. The victim was a teenage girl. Found her in the Valley behind a laundromat. Someone had hidden the body in an alleyway there and I stumbled across it when I was answering a call-out. A complaint about the smell. Someone had beaten her head in. Looked as if she was handcuffed first.'

'Who was she?'

'A working girl. Knew her from my foot patrol. She often did stints at a major brothel. Too young for it, but pulling her in would have only forced her into the system. I would sometimes throw her money for information.'

'An informant?' Eddie said.

'Charity more like it. I felt bad for her. Apparently this cop I doxed in was one of her regular clients. My witness reckons she saw this guy pick the girl up around the same time she died. But a couple of detectives quashed the case. They said they had a long running investigation into nearby brothels, and they didn't want anything ruining their progress. Whispers around the station said otherwise. They just didn't want any attention exposing their kickbacks. Besides, Mallory was the golden child.'

'Mallory?' Eddie said. 'George Mallory? That smug bastard they put on kid's morning telly? Officer Safety?'

Royce nodded. 'I tried to push the investigation for as long as I could, even on my own time. But I found myself transferred to the outer suburbs before I got anywhere. Couple of months later a couple of coppers from New South Wales call me up. They wanted me to tell them about Mallory, about my witness and what she saw. My original report had gone missing after Licensing Branch snubbed the case.'

Eddie wiped mayo from his beard. 'Of course.'

'They had two new interstate bodies and they wanted to pin them on Mallory. Both were working girls beaten to death. Wrists torn up by handcuffs. You know that prick has five daughters right? Good Catholic boy.'

'They got him though,' Eddie said. 'Locked up for life. Saw it on the news.'

Royce shrugged. 'Three girls dead.'

'And you're stuck out here.'

That wasn't the whole story. But Royce couldn't say the truth out loud. He couldn't tell anyone that his witness died of a drug overdose only days after giving her statement. Or that she had a history of mental illness, and that she too was a working girl. Any of those factors were enough to taint a statement, but all three would leave it dead in the water.

To be honest, Royce himself even struggled to believe her at first. But the nightmares had started to plague him, and he couldn't stand waking up anymore with the feeling of the girl's blood on his hands. So not long after the phone call from New South Wales, he confronted Mallory at his home, and told him what the witness had said about that night. Mallory had tried to lie, but Royce saw the truth in his eyes.

That's why he found someone else, someone with a clean record who was willing to play witness for the right price. They never did end up testifying at trial, but their written statement was fuel to the fire in the New South Wales case. Royce often had to remind

himself why he made the choice: you knew he was guilty from the very moment you saw him, and the lies you told helped catch a killer.

‘Earlier this morning,’ Royce said. ‘Jacob was saying something about the cops and his father. About some of the stuff that used to go on around here.’

‘Before my time, mate,’ Eddie said. ‘Like you, I made my fair share of career mistakes. Transferred out here a good decade ago. From what I understand, the guy before me wasn’t too friendly with the locals, especially out at the Squats.’

Royce thought of a story his father once told him. Back in the sixties, patrolling officers would head out to West End on a Saturday night and harass the bodgies and widgies, maybe roughhouse the local Aboriginals. Sometimes the detectives would even send them out with a list of names and known locations. The aim? Nothing more than to push them until they left for good, using any force necessary.

‘I can imagine,’ Royce said.

Eddie shook his head. ‘Nah, mate. You know what I did my first shift at the Well? Cleaned out the tank. Hosed the blood out into the dirt like the place was a bloody abattoir. Can tell you now, none of it belonged to a white fella.’

‘Jesus,’ Royce said.

‘Things were different back then. Tried my best to set things right when I got the transfer.’

‘Did they fire the old Sergeant?’

Eddie opened his can of drink, carbonation hissing. ‘Bastard got a promotion.’

With the knife tucked into his belt, he climbed up towards the reach, feet searching for footholds in the jagged hillside, hands gripping tufts of wild grass growing like wayward stubble upon the rock. He paused for a moment, breath ragged, and listened for movement on the wind. Only once had he found someone else up here in the old mining camp—a couple lying out on a blanket among the dirt and stones, the man’s pants tangled around his feet and the woman groaning beneath him. He had crouched down low in the scrub, and watched them from the tree line, leaving only once they and he had finished.

When he finally reached the flat expanse, he patted the dust from his jeans. He liked it up here, the peace of it all, but when he took a deep breath he imagined something sweet dancing at the back of his throat. And he knew the smell would only grow with the days stretching and the heat rising. He thought of the mine’s entrance. The opening was a great maw cut into the sunken earth of the foothill, barbed stones like teeth ready to strip flesh from bone. He didn’t want to go back in there, but he would have to. If only to see she still remained. Later though, he thought. Later.

Below him he saw vehicles moving along the road, drifting through the fields like loose clots in a vein. The road ran alongside a square of shops, and a police 4WD was parked out front. He tried to discern the shapes sitting upright in the cab, but the sun was slowly setting and the receding light of day sheened the landscape in a blinding glow. He raised a hand to shield his eyes, squinted as if aiming down the barrel of a gun.

VI

When Royce arrived at work the next day, Eddie called him into his office.

‘Got something for you,’ he said, and slid an envelope across the desktop. ‘Madeline White dropped it off this morning. It’s a letter from Rose.’

Royce stilled his hands before reading. The handwriting on the letter was spacious and angular, sharp bridges joining the cursive. It was clear she had written it in a hurry.

Safta,

I need to go now and I don't know when I will be back. Please don't look for me. I will be fine. I have money. More than enough of it to survive for now. But I need to make a new life for myself. I need a new beginning. Things have happened that I wish I could take back. Bad things. Things that could get me into trouble. I pray to God for answers but he doesn't respond. I feel like I am alone. Like I'm lost in the night. You are a light but I don't deserve you. I promise to contact you again when I can. But I can't come back to the Well. Not ever. Please give Dad my love.

Rose.

P.S. I know you will keep me in your prayers. Some people may come looking for me. But tell them not to bother and that it wasn't Mick's fault. I found out on my own. I love you.

Royce returned the letter to the envelope. 'Mick? That's got to be the boyfriend Rose told Madeline about.'

Eddie nodded. 'Maybe Mick Hastings? He's about the right age.'

'You mean the guy we had in lock-up? From the pub fight?'

'Very same one.'

Royce leant back in his chair. 'Nearly a week since we found the car. Either she's still out there or Madeline sat on it.'

'She thought maybe the trouble it spoke about was with us. That maybe Rose was running from the law. Said she didn't want to get her granddaughter into a mess. But after your visit the other day, she gave it some thought and decided to hand it in.'

'Even so, what the hell has that got to do with the boyfriend?'

Eddie licked his thumb and wiped at something on his desk. Despite how messily he often dressed, the Sergeant's office was spotless. A far cry from some of the people Royce had worked under during his early years. Their desks were stained with coffee rings and cigarette ash, loose files stacked head high.

'I don't know,' Eddie said. 'But maybe we should find out.'

Nicole headed out on foot early morning, the dog tracking close behind.

When they finally reached the foothills bordering the town, the girl's hair had grown matted with sweat and her legs were tender and sore. She took a bottle from her mother's calico bag, poured water into her cupped hand, and offered it to the panting dog. The animal's hot breath trilled through his nose as he lapped at her palm. The man had to be around here somewhere. She couldn't say why, but she just knew.

She soon stumbled upon a small clearing at the base of the hill, and a ramshackle tin and timber shack stood out in the open, encircled by thick underbrush.

Boo rubbed against her legs as she watched the structure from afar. After losing count of the minutes, she started to move closer, but the animal refused to follow. 'C'mon, Boo,' she said.

He let out a soft whine. Raised one paw before lowering it again.

'Fine. You can wait here then.'

She approached the rusted walls of the shack. The corrugated sheets were secured to the frame beneath by rope, and when the wind picked up the tin rattled. Nicole thought the building itself looked as if it were breathing. Around back she found two tree stumps. One had been hollowed out for a makeshift fire pit, and the other was stained with blood.

Boo began to bark from the underbrush. The sound startled Nicole and she ran towards the tree line, hiding herself in the shadows. 'Boo,' she said. 'Quiet.'

She could hear someone whistling nearby. The young man from the grocery store appeared at the edge of the clearing, and he wound his way down through the trees towards

the shack. A dead wallaby was draped over his shoulder and he carried a rifle in his off-hand. Blood stained the front of his denim overalls.

He dropped the carcass onto the chopping block. With the knife from his belt, he began to prepare the animal, removing the pelt and viscera. The process was inelegant and his hands grew slick and dark.

After finishing up, he started a fire in the dead coals that lined the pit. 'You hungry?' he asked. 'Got more than enough here.'

Nicole watched him in silence. There had to be someone else inside the shack. Who else could he be talking to? Maybe they had seen Nicole walking around before, peering through the gaps in the tin wall.

'Hot out here,' he continued. 'Got some water inside.'

When she was a little girl, Nicole had seen a television show about a detective chasing a murderer. In the final episode it was revealed that the killer was the detective himself. He had two minds in one body, and sometimes they would talk to the other. Maybe he had the same problem. Maybe that's what Norm meant when he called him simple.

The man stabbed the knife into the cutting block and stood up. He gazed over the shadowy trees until he made eye contact with Nicole. 'You can talk, can't you?'

Out on his morning smoko, Farrow found the demountable door ajar. Through the gap he could hear someone talking on the telephone.

‘I know you’re pushing me on this, but I’m not going to budge,’ Anders said. ‘Yes I know that, but it doesn’t matter. Why do they want to purchase it now? They had their chance already. Yes, I know. I can promise you that and more. Everything is up and running now, but it will only improve in the next few weeks. I already have farmers guaranteeing me their cooperation. I just need a little more up-front funding to—’

Someone down the line cut him off.

Farrow glanced over his shoulder. He saw striking millers sitting in the back tray of a ute, watching the white smoke seep from the stack, beer cans in hand. One of them had a handful of ice from the esky and he was running it across his sweating forehead.

‘Yes,’ Anders said. ‘Next week then. I’ll pay it back, I promise.’

After hearing the click of the phone, Farrow let himself inside. Anders was behind Wayne’s desk and his hair was uncombed, the skin beneath his eyes soft and dark.

‘Got a moment?’ Farrow asked.

Anders cleared paperwork from the desktop. ‘Of course. How can I help?’

Farrow sat down. ‘I’ll need to make a trip out of town. Few tools I have to pick up. Couple of spare parts.’

The demountable was a hotbox this time of day and a lone pedestal fan thrummed against the heat in the corner. Anders lit a cigarette from his jacket pocket, smoke curling in the draft. ‘You bring a tool box from home, don’t you?’

Farrow nodded. 'Been meaning to replace a few things for a while now. But I haven't really had the work.'

Anders removed his wallet, thumbed a wad of notes, and passed them to Farrow. It was more than a hundred dollars. 'Enough?' he asked.

'They're my tools,' Farrow said. 'I can pay for them. Just wanted you to know where I was going while on the clock.'

Anders shook his head. 'You're using them for the mill, so consider it an investment. I trust you'll return the change.'

Farrow hesitated before pocketing the cash. He paused in the open doorway. 'Everything going well? Heard we might be struggling to get the deliveries out.'

Anders smiled weakly. 'Everything is fine. More than fine. Who's saying otherwise?'

Farrow looked away towards the mill, the muscles in his neck rigid. 'No one.'

Mick Hastings's last known was a caravan, one of many in a park just outside of town. A middle-aged woman answered the manager's office door, and her hair was wrapped in a frayed towel, the material about as clean as the cold sore blooming at the edge of her mouth.

'Mick Hastings,' Eddie said. 'He around?'

The woman leant against the frame. 'Not for a month, maybe more.'

'Miss rent?'

She shook her head. 'Nah. Noisy bastard. Drinking with his mates all night, driving his ute up and down the entry way. Told him to keep it down or fuck off.'

'And what'd he do?' Royce asked.

She looked at him like he was dense. 'What d'ya think?'

'You know where he went?' Eddie asked.

The woman shook her head. 'Left a forwarding, but I don't have it. Me husband looks after that kind of stuff.'

'He around?'

She cackled, the sound brittle. 'Meant to be fixing the dunny leak.' She pointed towards a row of wood and tin outhouses. 'Fatso can't handle a day's work, but. So he's bugged off again. Most probably to the pub. Can get him to call youse when he gets back though.'

Eddie gave her their number. 'You do that.'

They waited for the call back at base.

On the pinboard by the phone Royce found a handwritten notice from Walker: *Phonecall for Royce 0740. Again 0820. Please call back.* Royce tore the note from the wall and threw it in the bin. Maybe Walker didn't understand you needed a name or number to return a phone call.

After a couple of quiet hours and far too many cups of coffee, Eddie sent Royce out on an errand. Last time he was working, McIntyre had copped a call about teenagers with firecrackers. By the time he had arrived on the scene, the teenagers were gone, and so were a whole street worth of letterboxes. McIntyre had taken the paperwork home to complete. 'Do us a favour, Royce,' Eddie said. 'Trying to sort the call-out file. Drive over, and pick it up from him, will you?'

McIntyre's place was a fibro cottage half-way across town. Royce found him in the attached carport, bench-pressing in a home gym. 'Didn't mean to interrupt. Just here to pick up those letterbox files.'

McIntyre exhaled heavily, racked the weight, and sat up. 'So you're a courier now,' he said. 'That part of your big case?'

'C'mon buddy,' Royce said. 'Just doing what the boss says.'

McIntyre stood up. He began to load more plates onto the bar and his triceps were tensing with the movement. When he was dressed in his uniform, the Constable looked like typical Irish stock—bow-legged and stout. But now, wearing nothing but shorts and a singlet, Royce could tell how strong he truly was, his forearms and shoulders bloated by thick muscle.

‘Good to keep your strength up with a job like ours,’ he said as he collared the weight. ‘Facing someone down, you want the upper hand.’ McIntyre moved behind the bench. ‘Have a go, then.’

Physical activity was mandatory at the academy. You spent a lot of your time jogging, swimming, doing body-weight stuff like chin-ups and push-ups. At the time it had been far too easy for Royce. His family was always pretty outgoing, before his father’s accident anyhow, and his younger years as a footy rover had left him strong and fast. He never really did understand lifting heavy as a cop. The bigger you were, the harder it was to chase someone down. Most of the muscular patrolmen he knew were used for one thing, and one thing alone—their mammoth frames perfect for dispersing crowds.

‘More the footy type,’ Royce said.

A smile inched onto McIntyre’s face, the skin around pulled tight like a healed scar. ‘Suit yourself. Let’s go then.’

He followed McIntyre into the dark of the house. There was dust along the skirting boards and the closed windows left the air stagnant like the interior of a mausoleum. Royce coughed to clear his throat.

‘You wanna drink?’ McIntyre asked.

Royce checked his watch. ‘Have to get moving.’

‘Whatever.’ McIntyre disappeared down the hall. The chink of glass could be heard from the kitchen, then the harsh spray of a tap.

Royce put his hands in his pockets as he waited. He looked over the photographs on the wall. Most of them were aged, the colour drained from the frozen images until the persons in each seemed jaundiced. But one photograph was clearly brand new. It showed a little girl on the beach and she was not much older than Shaun. A woman’s hand rested atop the girl’s shoulder, but the rest of her was missing, body lost beyond the edges.

McIntyre spoke up from behind him, a glass of water in one hand and a file in the other. ‘My little girl.’

‘Didn’t know you had a kid,’ Royce said.

McIntyre shrugged. ‘Her mother has her most of the time. She’s living up North these days. Don’t really get to see her much.’

Royce looked over the photograph again. The resemblance was only faint. ‘Why don’t you transfer?’

He took a swig from the glass. ‘Missus doesn’t want a bar of me, just my money. Doesn’t matter I got barely two cents to rub together.’

The state of McIntyre’s place started to make sense to him. A copper’s wage was enough to hold a family together in one place, but imagine how much stretch you would need to support two households.

‘Must be tough,’ Royce said. ‘Couldn’t imagine leaving my family behind.’

‘Wasn’t exactly planned.’

‘What happened?’ he asked.

McIntyre chewed the inside of his cheek ‘You know. The stupid stuff. Told her I was sorry and I could change. She didn’t believe it.’ The sound of his breathing grew loud and rhythmic in the quiet of the empty room. He wiped his nose with his hand. ‘Anyway, I won’t keep you.’

Out in the driveway, McIntyre passed Royce the file. He tossed it into the back seat of the LandCruiser, and climbed inside.

McIntyre rapped on the window. ‘You tell anyone about my family, or about what I said. I’ll fucking deck you. Hear me?’

The dashboard radio suddenly crackled to life. *Royce. You there? Over.*

He picked up the handset and responded.

Eddie continued. *Got a call back for Hasting's new address. Moved his caravan out towards the old shopping stretch. Swing by base and we'll head over now.*

'Be there soon,' Royce said.

McIntyre was still watching him through the open driver's side window. 'You looking for Mick.'

Royce started the 4WD. 'Couldn't tell you, mate. Just a courier.'

'Well I doubt Wayne's living in a caravan.'

McIntyre was smarter than he looked. But Royce remembered what Eddie had said the other day—play things close to the chest. 'See you around.'

McIntyre banged on the door with a closed fist. 'Drop around anytime.'

Nicole sat down in front of the fire pit. She watched as the man loaded the diced wallaby meat into a charred pot.

‘Know how to build a fire up?’ he asked. ‘Need the coals hot enough for cooking.’

He disappeared around the front of the shack.

While he was gone Nicole stoked the fire with a piece of kindling. She dropped more wood into the pit and the sudden heat stung her eyes. The man emerged again carrying a bowl filled with carrots and potatoes. He poured the contents into the iron pot and then added water and stock.

‘Dog belong to you?’ he asked.

Boo had returned to the edge of the clearing, the animal pacing back and forth, tail between his legs.

‘His name is Boo,’ she said.

‘And yours?’

‘Nicole.’

With the steel-toe of his boot, the man pushed the stew pot towards the heart of the fire. He kicked the coals closer, ensconcing the curved iron. ‘People call me Bishop,’ he said.

The girl thought over what she was going to say. She didn’t know much about the man, and didn’t want to say the wrong thing. ‘Is that your first name? Or your last?’

‘Does it matter?’

Nicole shrugged. ‘So you live out here then?’

Bishop retrieved the rifle from the shack wall. ‘Was born in the Well,’ he said.

‘Mother lived here.’

‘Where is she now?’

He sat down on the stump, and started to break down the rifle, cleaning each component with an oil rag from his back pocket. ‘Dunno. Ran away a few years back. Haven’t seen her since I was sixteen.’

‘How come?’

‘Because of my stepdad.’

Bishop reassembled the rifle carefully. He brought the worn stock to his shoulder and eyed down the sights. Nicole’s father owned a weapon, a single-shot shotgun given to him as a boy. Her father had been taught how to shoot at a young age, and he had spent his early teenage years roaming the foothills for hares and wildcats. Nicole would sometimes open the bedroom wardrobe when she was home alone and take the weapon out from its hiding place. She didn’t dare remove it from the room, but sometimes she would load a shell into the breech and feel the sheer weight of the weapon in her hands.

‘You shoot the wallaby?’ she asked.

‘Tracked him all the way to the old mines. Bullet went straight through the neck. You ever fire a rifle?’

She shook her head. ‘Dad has a gun. Told me he was gonna show me how to shoot. But Mum wasn’t happy. She said it was dangerous.’

The remains of the fire crackled between them. Slowly the smell of the stewing meat seeped through the closed pot and Nicole’s mouth began to water. Bishop served up the food on plates from inside.

The meat was tough but she ate ravenously. Bishop watched her the whole time, his brown eyes almond shaped and almost lidless.

When they’d both finished eating, Bishop buried the remains of the wallaby out past

the tree line. Flies had already begun to gather on the viscera and he shooed them away with a hand. His clothes grew sodden as he worked, and he removed the straps of his overalls, sweat glistening on his dark skin.

She stood up and dusted her jeans.

‘You leaving?’ he asked.

‘Getting late,’ she said. ‘I might see you if you’re around.’

Bishop smiled, revealing scarred gums and missing teeth.

Nicole left the clearing and the dog emerged from the scrub, trailing her every step.

He let out a series of whines.

‘What’s gotten into you?’ she asked.

The dog’s tail beat against her legs. He licked her hands with a wet tongue over and over again, as if in disbelief of her safe return.

The new address was for a rundown shop front, one of many in a lonely row.

Shielding his eyes from the glare, Royce peered through the front window. Inside he saw sheets of black plastic laid out across the floor, clothes hangers dangling from wall-racks like skeletal fruit. When he tried the doorknob, a sign hanging above the frame rattled—*Liz's Modiste* written across the front.

'Looks a bust,' Royce said. 'Anyone live nearby?'

Eddie searched the letterbox by the road. 'Not for a long while,' he said. 'These places opened up after I transferred in, back when the farms were booming. Didn't last long though. Locals aren't too fond of anything but the basics.'

A car door slammed somewhere nearby, the echo flat in the long and empty street.

Eddie clicked his fingers. 'Around back.'

Royce led Eddie towards the rear of the store, moving through a delivery causeway that ran between the buildings. The walls on either side were starting to crumble and a few loose bricks lay on the cement.

As they reached the rear yard, the path suddenly opened up into scrubland. A caravan sat out in the grass and the front awning flapped in the wind like a loose sail, tow bar connected to a yellow ute. Soft music rolled out from the open windows and Royce recognised the song as a sad pop tune about trains and cattle country.

'Anyone home?' Eddie said.

The caravan's flyscreen yawned open to reveal Mick. His stained singlet was torn at the neck. 'What the fuck you want,' he said, voice croaky.

'More flies with honey,' Eddie said.

'Speak English, mate.'

Eddie crossed his arms. 'Try again. Politer this time.'

Mick took a cigarette from the pack in his pocket. 'What can I do for you, officers?'

'Heard you left the caravan park,' Royce said.

'Uncle bought this place not long ago. Got permission to be here.'

Eddie kicked at a piece of scrap metal on the ground. 'Well, it's a tidy spot. Bet the girls at the pub go wild for all the rubbish and dirt. You got a girlfriend, Mick?'

He sat down on the caravan steps. 'Why? You looking for a date?'

'Rose White,' Eddie said.

Mick ashed his smoke into the dirt. 'Yeah. I know her.'

'You see her recently?'

'Not since she dropped me.'

'When was that?' Royce asked.

'Couple of weeks back. Did it over the phone too. Bitch didn't even have the guts to say it to my face.'

Royce wrote it all down in his notebook. 'Rose's grandmother told us that she hasn't been home in a while. You know where she's staying?'

Mick sighed. 'Why you asking me all this shit?'

Eddie passed him the letter. 'We found a car the other day. There was blood inside, and we think it may have belonged to Rose.'

Mick read the letter slowly, mouthing the words. He folded the paper shut with shaking hands and passed it back.

‘What kind of trouble was Rose in?’ Eddie asked.

Mick shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’

‘What wasn’t your fault then, Mick?’

His voice was louder now. ‘I told you, I don’t fucking know.’

‘Well, what do you know?’ Eddie asked. ‘Can you tell us why she left you? I saw you at the pub, mate. You like to brawl. Did Rose go packing because you laid a hand on her?’

Royce knew it was an intentional low blow. He remembered what Walker had told him about Mick’s old man, and what he did to his wife. The wound was still raw, even after all these years.

Mick stared at the ground, red splotches spreading on his cheeks like the aftermath of a slap. ‘I ain’t a fucking woman basher, all right?’

‘Okay,’ Royce said. ‘We believe you. But we need you to help us with this. Do you know a man called Andrew Lynch?’

Before Mick could respond, a Charger pulled up out of the causeway. Behind the wheel was a colossal man, thick beard covering most of his face, hair buzzed short to the scalp. He pulled over by the caravan and unrolled the driver’s side window. ‘Boy in trouble?’ he asked.

Eddie spat into the grass by his feet. ‘None of your concern, Harry.’

The man brought his thick arm up onto the sill. There was an eighty-eight tattooed on his forearm and the thick lines were shadowed by hair. Royce thought it looked rough enough for a prison job.

‘He under arrest?’ Harry said.

‘We’re just having a chat,’ Royce said. ‘Nothing more.’

The man behind the wheel squinted at Royce. After a long moment he turned back toward Eddie. ‘You want to talk to him about anything else, you call Wayne.’

‘C’mon, mate,’ Eddie said. ‘No reason to be rough about it.’

The man cracked his knuckles. ‘Get in the car, boy.’

Mick looked up from the caravan steps. His eyes darted between Royce and Eddie, like a dog wanting to break heel.

‘Get in the fucking car,’ Harry said.

Mick snubbed out his cigarette, stood up, and opened the passenger side door of the Charger. As Harry reversed back up the causeway, Royce saw the damage on the man’s vehicle—the bumper was cracked and dented, the headlight held together with electrical tape.

VII

Royce woke early Sunday morning. It was the first of December, almost two weeks exactly since he and Eddie had found the hatchback down in the scrub. Yet there was still no word of Rose's whereabouts or what had happened that night. And there was still no sign of Lynch.

He took breakfast in the lounge room before heading to work. Shaun was playing on the floor with a toy train set and he dragged it along the uneven floorboards, wheelset rattling over the gaps.

Down the hallway the phone rang.

'Jim,' the voice said. 'How you been?'

Very few people called Royce that. 'Tried to phone you the other day,' he said. 'Was worried you may have slipped and hit your head or something.'

'Tougher than you think,' his father said. 'Years until you get rid of me.'

The blinds above the kitchen sink struggled to close all the way and sunlight filled the room, warming Royce's exposed skin. The summer days were growing longer already, and some part of him feared there would be a breaking point—endless hours of searing heat, the Well scorched as if in the midst of a wild fire.

'How's work?' Vic said. 'Boss up to scratch?'

‘Slow going,’ Royce told him. ‘But Knowles is good. Apparently he knew you back in the Academy.’

‘Ed Knowles? Years since I’ve heard that name. Good bloke. Always kept his head down, hands clean. Was always going on about having a perfect track record.’

Driving back to base last Wednesday after their chat with Mick, Eddie had been distracted. Royce tried to talk to him about Harry and the boy, but he wouldn’t budge. ‘You reckon this girl is still alive?’ he said after a long stretch of silence. ‘Don’t know,’ Royce told him. ‘I would like her to be. But my gut is starting to say otherwise.’ Eddie nodded. They drove on in silence after that.

Royce swapped the receiver to his other ear. ‘So you’re just checking up on me then? Seeing I’m in safe hands?’

His father’s voice was flat. ‘Haven’t spoke since the move. Just wanted to make sure you were feeling all right.’

The words were far too familiar. ‘Did Anna tell you to call me?’

Static on the line.

‘You there?’ Royce asked.

‘Just be careful, mate. Job’ll tear you apart if you let it.’

Royce saw Shaun coming up the hall, chubby legs bowed as if struggling to keep up with his sudden growth spurts. He let out a giggle as he lumbered forward.

‘I’ll be careful,’ Royce said

‘Good lad.’

He arrived at work to find a V8 Commodore parked out front, the tinted windows and missing hubcaps giving it away as a fleet vehicle. From his experience it was the ride of choice for a lot of senior detectives, particularly those in Armed Hold-Up Squad. Although the higher-ups purchased the powerful cars for highway patrol, some of the boys in AHUS would pitch the ride as a necessity, the extra horse-power allowing them to chase down a perp if things went sour.

Royce found Eddie in the shift office, talking to a man in an ill-fitting suit, the jacket stretched thin over his broad shoulders. ‘Ah, here you go,’ the Sergeant said. ‘This is young Royce.’

The stranger offered him a hand. ‘How you doing? Detective Sergeant Tyzinski.’

‘Let me guess,’ Royce said. ‘Armed Hold-Up?’

Tyzinski laughed, face pinched as if trying to recall a hazy memory. ‘Eddie said you were smart.’

‘What brings you all the way out here?’ Royce said.

‘Business, mate. All business. I was just talking to your boss here about a possible lead. Something to do with your missing girl.’

Tyzinski opened a file across Eddie’s desk. ‘I’ve been working a case for a long while now. Trying to make some headway, but it looks a dead-end. For you guys though, I think there could be something there.’

Eddie tapped a rhythm on his knees with thick fingers. Royce knew what he was thinking, because the same thing was running through his own mind—a big break wasn’t always the godsend it seemed to be. More often than not it led to more confusion, more

canvassing, more paperwork. Royce's father once said, 'If there really was someone up there watching over us, and he wanted to help us put the bad people away, then he would be delivering signed confessions. Not leads.'

Tyzinski laid out a series of photographs from the file. They showed a delivery truck parked roadside, the trailer emptied. Another was a pool of blood on the bitumen. 'Heists,' Tyzinski said. 'Fellas have been stopping trucks on isolated stretches of road, storming up with sawn-offs and balaclavas, and lifting everything inside. But they're clearly learning on the job. First time out, one of them slips as he runs up towards the truck, and the gun in his hand goes off. Clips one of their own guys in the back of the head. Driver saw the whole thing from the cab.'

'The guy dead?' Royce asked.

'Never found a body,' Tyzinski said. 'Driver of the truck said the shot fella was there on the road last he could see. But the heisters blindfolded him before leaving. So we can only guess they took their injured friend with them.'

'So what has this got to do with the girl?' Eddie said.

Tyzinski cocked his head. 'Right. Sorry. Spend so long thinking about these dickheads, you start to see them in your sleep. Anyway, the first couple of trucks are white goods and electronics. Kind of stuff with serial numbers. We know a lot of that ends up with this one fella in the Valley who sells it out the back of his repair shop. So my partner and me drop in for a chat and find him selling washing machines and dryers with serials matching our missing merchandise. We push him for details, but he's got nothing. He tells us the guy who sold him the goods never gave a name and was always real shady about the deals. Back alley kind of stuff. He remembered one thing about him though. Used to travel with a girl. Young, pretty. This prick can't remember one detail about the seller's face, but he can remember skirt. Said the seller called her Rose. Like the flower.'

Royce looked over at Eddie sipping his coffee.

‘I know what you’re wondering,’ Tyzinski continued. ‘How many Roses could there be? Well, back at the office about a week ago, I stumbled across a photo that had been doing the rounds. The photo your Sarge sent out. When I saw it, things started ticking over in my head about the case. I went back and showed it to my guy in the Valley and he said it was the very same girl who travelled with the seller.’

Royce took a deep breath.

Rose was more than a photograph now. The first piece of the puzzle had been laid down, but he couldn’t yet say if the picture slowly forming was one he liked. ‘So where do we go from here?’ he said.

Tyzinski stood. He flattened the creases in his dress pants. ‘I’m just passing through, mate. Got to head out to Maloney to follow something up. Higher-ups got a bug in their arse about me wasting time on the truck heists, especially now the trail is cold. But I just thought I would pop in while I was in the neighbourhood and soak up the glory of throwing you boys a bone.’

Eddie reached over the desk and shook the Detective’s hand. ‘Well, we do appreciate it. You’ve been a big help.’

‘Anytime, Sergeant. I paid my dues out in the sticks, so I know how tough it can be. You need anything taken care of, don’t be afraid to call.’ Tyzinski started for the door, but he stopped mid-step. ‘Actually, Ed. Do you mind if I borrow the young constable here for a moment? Hoping he could show me around before I go.’

‘I know all about you,’ Tyzinski said.

They were sitting in the unmarked Commodore, the fleet vehicle parked down a side street just around the corner from the station. When the Detective had told Royce to get in, he assumed they were going for a short drive. But not this short.

The Detective Sergeant started rifling for something under the driver’s seat. ‘Heard they’ve got a file on you thick as a ream of paper.’

A headache flared behind Royce’s eyes. ‘What can I do for you today, Detective?’

Tyzinski finally found what he was looking for—a wilted packet of cigarettes. He stoked one up with the dashboard lighter. ‘I see you don’t want any bullshit, so I’ll give it to you straight. The trail for my case didn’t go cold. Word came down the wire for me to cut things short, even though I was still making headway.’

Royce unrolled the passenger side window to let out the smoke. ‘Things like that happen all the time. Department politics and all that bullshit.’

‘Could be,’ Tyzinski said. ‘Here’s the thing though. As soon as I’m told to cut the investigation, the heists wrap-up. Hasn’t been another since then. This is nearly two months ago now.’

‘Coincidence?’ I say.

Tyzinski exhaled. ‘Maybe. But not long after the heisters go to ground, we get rumblings from a couple of our street-level informants. They tell us some cocky little shit has been going around Brissie looking for grunt work. Apparently he was telling the big-players that he was involved in a lot of truck heists earlier in the year, but was dropped when they moved on to bigger things. Kept saying pigs could never pin him on the past jobs though. You know why?’

‘Man on the inside,’ Royce said.

Tyzinski nodded. He flicked the remains of his cigarette out onto the road. 'A cop was part of it all. Maybe even more than one.'

Across the open bitumen a white ibis pecked at a fallen bin. An open rubbish bag was strewn across the soil and the waste had tumbled down into the gutter. Royce considered the possibility of a cop on the take. No surprises there, he thought. Not after what happened to you in Brisbane.

Tyzinski continued, 'These guys weren't just lifting tellys and washers either. They started going for the smaller stuff. Ciggies, alcohol. Much easier to transport and sell. Especially out in a place like this.'

'But how do you reckon the cops were playing in?'

'Tip-offs,' Tyzinski said. 'We reckon the heisters may have been working something out with the Brisbane dockers. The dockers would tell the heist guys which trucks were carrying the goods, and then give them the necessaries. Licence plates, travel routes, all that kind of thing. Shit, some of the guys working the heists may have even been union men themselves. Every time we tried to catch them in the act, things would go pear-shaped. Reckon a copper close to the operation was giving them a warning.'

'Why all the cloak-and-dagger?'

'When I realised that photo was your girl, a few things came to mind.' Tyzinski started counting off on his fingers. 'One. The boys I was looking for may have been Well locals. Two. If there's cop involvement, then the local constabulary may be more than a little bent.'

'You think someone's a rat? Why trust me, then?'

'When I said I know all about you, I wasn't fibbing. Got a few mates in New South Wales. I know how you act when offered the opportunity to do some good. I got a teenage

girl of my own, mate. I would have done the exact same thing. Fuck all this brotherhood bullshit. Some dogs just need to be put down.'

Royce's headache flared. He closed his eyes to see familiar visions behind the lids. Not now, he thought. Not in the daytime. 'You were the one trying to call me at work, weren't you?'

Tyzinski nodded. 'I needed a good man. My gut's telling me there's something bigger at play here, and it could go high up. People are starting to ask questions. There's talk about bent coppers everywhere in the news again, and some people are even blaming the commissioner.'

'So what you're saying is, be careful.'

Tyzinski lit up another cigarette, inhaled. 'Nah, mate. What I'm saying is, don't trust anyone.'

Nicole found Mariah stacking shelves at the back of the grocery store. The woman wore an apron around her waist, and a price gun was nestled awkwardly in the front pocket. ‘You come to visit me?’ the woman asked.

Nicole lingered by the counter. ‘I was around.’

‘Lunch break at school then, I guess.’

‘I guess.’

‘Well, I got a lot of work to do. Whole lot of stock needs to be priced before the boss comes in tomorrow.’

The girl kicked at a loose piece of linoleum trimming. ‘I can go. If you want.’

Mariah smiled. She passed the pricing gun to Nicole, handle first. ‘I could always use some help.’

The woman moved around the store, sorting through the shelves one by one, and Nicole followed. Anything that needed a new sticker was passed to the girl, and she added it with the pricing gun. The work was slow and repetitive and it took them nearly an hour to complete a single aisle.

‘Did you grow up in the Well?’ Nicole asked.

Mariah kept working. ‘Born and bred. Lived in Brisbane for a little bit when I was younger than you. My dad got a job there rebuilding the sewers. With all the new buildings

going up, the old pipes sometimes popped under the pressure. Government decided it all had to be rebuilt, even deeper this time.'

'Did you like it there?' she asked.

'Big country town,' Mariah said. 'But it had its charms. Dad moved back here after the sewer work dried up.'

'Why didn't you stay in Brisbane?'

The woman paused briefly, her hand lingering on the dusty surface of the shelf. 'You make mistakes every now and then,' she said. 'I thought I knew someone, but in the end I was wrong. Maybe you'll understand when you get older.'

'Sometimes I think about leaving the Well,' Nicole said. 'Maybe go to Warwick or something.'

'You mean run away?'

Nicole fingered the dial on the pricing gun.

'Maybe to go and see your Mum?' Mariah continued.

The girl's brow was knitted. She felt her eyes growing hot. 'I don't know. Maybe.'

'You ever tell your Dad about this?'

'What does it matter to you?'

Mariah leant down close to the girl. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to pry. Your father and I—' she considered her words. 'Your father and I have known each other for a very long time now. I don't want you going off and doing something silly. I didn't mean to upset you, all right?'

The girl wiped her nose with a sleeve. 'Not upset.'

Mariah ruffled the girl's uneven hair. 'Okay,' she said. 'You know, if you wanted, I could neaten this up for you.'

For as long as Nicole could remember her mother had cut her hair. It started as a way

to save money, but now it was all the girl knew. Over the last few months, she had let it grow wild and unkempt, the ends becoming more and more brittle. Besides the heat, it hadn't really bothered her. It was not often she encountered her own reflection anyway.

'Come on,' Mariah said. 'Bit of girl's fun.'

Mariah took the girl into the back room. 'Sit up for me, honey,' she said.

Nicole straightened her shoulders. The stool was unsteady beneath her bony backside and she had to tense her legs to keep balance. When she looked down at her knees, she saw her chest was visible through the thin cotton of her shirt. She crossed her arms to hide the growing bumps.

Mariah stood behind her. 'How short do you want it?'

The girl thought about it. Her mother had always insisted on keeping her hair long, 'like a good little lady,' she would say.

'Short,' Nicole said.

Mariah nodded. 'Thought maybe you wanted a rat's tail. See plenty of kids your age rocking them around town.'

Nicole brought a hand to her lips to cover the giggle. 'Gross.'

'Careful,' the woman said. 'Keep rocking about and you won't have a choice.'

Mariah began to chip away behind Nicole. The scissors snipped and clacked loudly around the crown of her head, moving from one side to the other. She felt the woman moving against her as she worked.

'So you're not a big fan of school then?' Mariah said. 'But what about your friends? Don't they miss seeing you?'

‘Don’t really have any,’ she said.

Mariah clucked her tongue. ‘Come on, now. I know that’s not true.’

Nicole thought of Bishop and the shack. That night, after she had eaten the wallaby stew, she had struggled to sleep. When she closed her eyes, she couldn’t help but imagine him out there among the trees and dark hills. He was alone in this world—his mother somewhere unknown. Did he still think about her? Did he wake in the night and feel a pain in his chest that wouldn’t go away? Almost as if an ember was lodged in his throat, slowly burning its way through him?

‘My friend doesn’t go to school,’ Nicole said. ‘He’s older.’

Mariah laughed. ‘A boy, hey?’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘Nothing,’ Mariah said. ‘Nothing at all.’

When she was finally done, the woman ran her hand through Nicole’s hair, roughing it up as she went. Goosebumps rose up along Nicole’s arms and legs.

‘Finished,’ Mariah said. She handed her an open make-up compact. ‘Here you go.’

Nicole looked herself over in the circular mirror. Her hair was shorter than she expected, only just reaching the tops of her ears. But the angled cut accentuated her pointed cheekbones, her thin lips.

‘What do you think?’ Mariah asked. ‘New you?’

Nicole brought a hand to her face, and the stranger in the reflection copied the movement exactly.

Farrow finished at the mill late afternoon.

He packed away his tools and work lamp into the ute's back tray, ready for his shift the next morning. Although tomorrow was meant to be a late start, he intended on coming in early anyway. Only limited boilers were needed with a skeleton crew running the mill, but if Anders was telling the truth about his long-term plan, Farrow wanted to fix Hollister's mistakes as soon as possible. A little bit of hard work now would leave them ready for when Wayne and the others eventually cracked. Back when he was first fighting, his father had trained him to be prepared like that. He taught Farrow to pre-empt the punch, long before it would land.

As he opened the driver's side door, a familiar voice rose up behind him. 'Pete told me you've been out here all day,' Anders said.

Farrow turned. 'Lot of work to be done.'

Anders eyed the nearby boilers. The exteriors were streaked with filth, built up from decades of use. 'To be blatantly honest, I am unfamiliar with this kind of thing. So I'll have to take your word for it.'

'You don't know mills?' Farrow said.

'I actually used to run a sand mine,' Anders said. 'Out on the islands. The company gave it to me to manage and I brought it up out of the ashes. The locals didn't approve of my methods at first, but I won them over eventually. Standards rose as did pay and job opportunities. I assume the company is hoping I can do the same thing again here.'

Farrow noticed sweat stains spreading out from under Ander's arms. He didn't understand why the man insisted on wearing a suit in this weather. Clothes meant nothing to him. He dressed for comfort and functionality alone. But maybe the man was doing it to send a message to those out on the road, a sign that things were different now—the days of the old guard were gone.

'It's actually pretty simple,' Farrow said. 'After the milling process, we get something called bagasse. We use that for fuel. Burn it right here in the boilers. The steam then passes through a turbine that powers the mill itself and the whole process leads to more bagasse. Things then repeat. As long as the boilers are up and running, anyhow.'

'And as long as someone like you is there to keep order,' Anders said. 'Almost like God and man, hey?'

Growing up in the Well, Farrow had attended church every Sunday. Said his prayers before bed every night. But when he started boxing as a teenager, he quickly learnt there was nothing in this world to guide you. Some of the men he had fought insisted on good luck charms, or superstitious rituals to give them confidence in the ring. But that wasn't for Farrow. He had only ever lost one fight, and that was by his choice alone. No totem or deity had ever led him into a bout, but his fists and instincts had won him plenty.

'You're passionate about your work, aren't you?' Anders said.

'If I do something, I do it well.'

The man reached into his pocket and brought out a pay envelope. 'I appreciate that. I'm unbelievably lucky to have men like you here to help me. And I just want you to know there's a future for you.'

'You said that already. Back at Pete's.'

Anders shook his head. 'I mean something more. Getting the mill up and running is only the first step.'

Farrow thought back to the phone call he had overheard, hushed voices conspiring in the demountable. ‘Your bosses. They’re happy with everything going on?’

Anders smiled. His teeth were small and yellow. ‘Of course they are. The company has great plans for this town, and they’re very happy with how everything is going. But we need men like you to help us with the future.’

Farrow took his pay from the older man’s hand, pocketed it. ‘The Well’s not new to people like you. First it was the sugar, then it was the mines.’

Anders grasped Farrow’s shoulders. ‘Just think about it, okay?’

Leaving the bitumen of Mill Road, Farrow drove down a farmer’s trail, the worn ruts cutting through a field of overgrown seedlings.

Through the windscreen he saw the stack expelling rolls of sweet smoke against the sky. Although Farrow himself was done for the day, others would stay inside until late evening. Some of the millers preferred this shift. It was easier to work the steaming machines during the night, when the humidity was far less oppressive. And besides, the pub was always less crowded by the time they were done.

Farrow cut the ignition and waited. He could see Little Mill Road through the stalks, leading towards town. If someone were to leave work via the rear entrance, they would have to cross his path.

After sitting there for nearly an hour, he saw Ander’s vehicle cruising along the bitumen, tinted windows rolled up. Farrow tried to start his ute, but the engine wouldn’t turn. He twisted the key again. The vehicle finally sputtered to life, blue diesel smoke puffing in his rear vision mirror.

He ghosted Anders' sedan from afar, keeping sight through the stalk breaks and open stretches of scrubland. For someone unfamiliar with the Well, the overlapping knot of farm-lines and back roads would be deceptively complex, almost a labyrinth. But Farrow knew them well. A map of it all was branded into his mind from a childhood of roaming.

Past the outskirts of town, Anders pulled into a roadside motor motel, the only structure along the empty stretch, and Farrow saw a familiar Charger parked in the front lot. He continued past, performed a lurching u-turn, and then came back down the narrow road.

Pulling up on the opposite side of the bitumen, he watched as Anders unlocked a room and disappeared inside. Much like his father, Farrow had the ability to peg a man's nature, to understand what made them tick. It was a skill that often separated a good fighter from a great one. But Anders was something else entirely. He was hard to read, and he had already lied once about the mill owners. Farrow believed if you were going to be working side-by-side with a man, then you needed to see his hand. He couldn't be keeping secrets, and he couldn't be telling lies.

It wasn't long until Farrow saw a familiar figure peek out from behind the motel's front office. The man squinted at Anders' vehicle from afar, wrote something down, and then headed inside to the front counter. He re-emerged a moment later carrying a dog-eared copy of the Yellow pages, and sauntered over to the pay phone by the road's edge.

Farrow sunk lower in the driver's seat. He watched Mick open the phonebook and start flipping through the pages, blonde hair hanging low over his face like a hood. He circled something with a pen before dialling a number. Through the open window Farrow heard snatches of words above the wind.

'Looks it—yeah—just outside of town—before the next lot comes through.' Mick then read a string of numbers and letters from the piece of paper. Farrow knew them to be Ander's licence plate.

After hanging up the phone, Mick tore the circled page from the spine of the phonebook and jammed it into his pocket. He went back inside the motel office, only to return empty handed. Farrow waited for him to leave in the Charger before crossing the road.

A teenager manned the motel's desk. His hair was bleached marble white and the exposed scalp was raw and angry looking. 'You got a phonebook I can use?' Farrow said.

The kid snorted, passed him the Yellow Pages with a heave. 'Thing's a doorstep for as long as I can remember. Now everyone's after it.'

Farrow laid the book out across the countertop. He thumbed the pages until he found a gap in the ream, then opened the spine wide. The surrounding business names meant nothing to him, but he took note of the page number. With his finger he traced an indentation about halfway down the page, the uneven circle placed close towards the edge of the margin.

Boo ran up ahead of the girl and began to sniff the wild grass growing through the cracked bitumen, catching the scent of something unknown. Nicole couldn't understand how the animal smelt anything out here. Although the mill was more than a kilometre away, the sweet smell of smoke still filled the air.

The rumble of an engine grew louder behind her. A red car rolled past, slowed, and then pulled over onto the dirt shoulder of the road. The young man behind the wheel spoke to her as she drew near. 'I know you,' he said, tucking his blonde hair behind his ears. 'Seen you around town. You're Will's little girl.'

Nicole shielded her face from the sun. 'So?'

'You wanna lift?' the man said. 'Too hot to be out here walking, isn't it?'

'My mum told me I wasn't supposed to ride with strangers.'

The man laughed. 'Well, what your mum doesn't know can't hurt her, right? Besides, I know your dad. I'm not a stranger.'

Farrow hunted through his bedroom wardrobe, dragging out boxes and garbage bags filled with Molly's clothing. He found the phonebook at the back, hidden beneath the old duffel bag that housed his father's shotgun, and it was the same edition as the one from the motor motel. He turned to the missing page. About halfway down, near the margin, he found a business name—*QBI Importers Pty Ltd.*

He moved to the phone in the kitchen, and dialled the listed number. The sound cut abruptly on the seventh ring, mechanical clicks echoing down the line as the call was transferred. This time someone picked up.

A male voice spoke. 'FSPDU.'

Farrow listened for sounds on the line. All he heard was the man's laboured breathing.

'Hello?' the voice asked.

'Who is this?' Farrow said.

'Painters and Dockers, mate. Union house. Out at the wharf.'

'Is Wayne there? Wayne Hastings?'

Silence on the line. A deeper voice spoke up. 'Who the fuck is this? Who's calling?'

Farrow hung up the phone.

He stood there, hand held against the receiver, until he heard a car pull into the drive outside. Farrow parted the blinds in the lounge room to see the Charger parked out front, Mick still behind the wheel. The tendons in his jaw began to pulse.

He was about to let the blinds fall shut again when he saw Nicole exit the passenger side. She had the dog with her and the animal began to race through the yard, tongue lolling.

Farrow confronted the girl inside. 'Where were you?'

She closed the front door. 'School.'

'You know better than to ride with strangers.'

'He knows you, Dad. He's not a stranger.'

Farrow bit the inside of his cheek, taste of copper on his tongue. 'You changed your hair,' he said. 'Your mother never liked it like that.'

'I know,' she said.

Dinner was waiting on the table when Royce arrived home, a simple roast gone cold, the meat like waterlogged leather. He had to chew until his mouth was sore and he washed down each bite with a slug of beer.

Despite how hard he tried to keep the thoughts at bay, work kept creeping into his mind. He and Eddie talked things over after Tyzinski dropped him back at base, but he hadn't mentioned what was said in the Commodore. He knew Eddie was a good cop, but he couldn't yet shake what Tyzinski had said—don't trust anyone.

Anna watched him eat from across the table.

'You going to have some?' he asked.

'I'm all right,' she said. 'Already ate.'

'It's late. You should've gone to bed.'

She stood up from the table, walked over to the sink, and ran the tap. 'I know you're still settling in at work, and you can't do much about your shifts. But you've been coming home later and later, Jim. It's a little too familiar.'

'I'm sorry. But I'm working. What choice do I have?'

She was silent.

'Look, if you want, I can try and make some more time. We can take Shaun out for the night. Go to the movies or something.'

Anna cut the water. She looked at him and gave a weak smile. 'That would be nice.'

Norm eased the flyscreen shut.

Today had been a long day. The young fella that sometimes helped him out at the shop—Andy Lynch—had been missing his shifts, and Norm had to pick up the slack. The kid was always a bit of a tosser but at least he would show up. It was dark by the time he finally finished up work, and all he wanted to do was to go home and sit in peace with a cold beer. But no. His missus had to start on him the moment he walked through the door.

The wood of the verandah groaned as he leant his weight against the balustrade. He took a slug from his beer and the condensation left his fingers glistening in the moonlight. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something on the bottom step of the verandah. He made his way over to find a makeshift envelope, made from folded paper and a rubber band. Inside was cash and a note—*This should leave us even.*

Norm's wife called out from deep inside the house. 'Norm. Where the hell d'ya go? You drinking again?'

Norm stood back up and pocketed the money. He heard the television playing next door, canned laughter blaring out through the empty street.

That poor girl, he thought. It was only time until she was just like her father, her face already wearing that same savage grimace, eyes cold and unflinching.

Norm threw his empty bottle into the front bush before heading back inside.

VIII

When Farrow arrived at work the next morning, Pete was waiting for him in the rear lot, his doughy face red. ‘You seen Johnson? Evans?’ he asked.

Farrow shook his head. ‘Not since yesterday.’

Pete kicked at the ground, dust exploding in a plume before him. ‘Fuck. Can’t trust anyone. Give ‘em a paycheque and they bugger straight off. Should know better by now.’

You would often find a few millers missing from the floor the morning after payday. Farrow himself was even running late after visiting the bank this morning, to pay off some of what he owed. For the most part though, the missing men would be at home nursing a hangover, or maybe still resting their heads on the pub counter. Without fail a few of them would come complaining to management the next day about their lost shifts, citing seniority and their years of service. Way Farrow saw it, if you made a bad choice, then you had to deal with the consequences.

‘Try the pub?’ he said.

Pete nodded. ‘Already done, mate. Worst day for it as well. Pick up for the Brissie port this afternoon. We need all the hands we can get.’

On his drive in, Farrow had noticed the main road was pretty much clear, the strikers waning. ‘You try any of the old regulars?’

Pete shook his head. ‘Anders won’t have a bar of it. Doesn’t trust them. Anyway, I doubt they would take the offer. Wasn’t exactly welcomed with open arms at the pub.’

‘We need people who know what they’re doing,’ Farrow said.

Pete took off his cap and wiped his forehead. ‘At this point, I would take any bloke who actually showed up.’

Later that afternoon, Farrow saw a rust-bucket HK Holden pull up next to his ute, crack as long as a man’s arm in the windshield. Johnson sat in the passenger seat and he argued with a tired looking woman behind the wheel.

Farrow watched them from the rear entrance. His hands were stained with oil and he wiped them clean with a rag from his pocket. Johnson slammed the car door, and the HK thundered away down Little Mill Road.

‘Pete’s been looking for you,’ Farrow said.

Johnson wore a bitter look on his face. ‘Don’t even get me started. Some bastard slashed my tyres overnight. Did over Evans down the street as well.’

‘You see the guys?’

‘Was asleep, mate. Dead of night. Fucking kids, hey? The nerve of them.’

‘How do you know it was kids?’

Johnson laughed. ‘Who else could be fucking bothered?’

Royce headed to the station around midday.

Driving along the main road through town, he heard the brief wail of a siren behind him. He checked his rear-vision mirror to see the LandCruiser following, Eddie at the wheel. The Sergeant signalled for him to pull over.

‘Been trying to call you the last quarter hour,’ Eddie said as Royce slipped into the passenger side. ‘Wife said you’d already left.’

‘What’s the rush?’ Royce asked.

Eddie accelerated. ‘Got a call this morning from Lynch’s landlord, asking if we were still looking for him. Apparently he just turned up out of nowhere. Still in the granny flat last I spoke with him.’

Royce cinched his seatbelt. ‘Well, let’s get the bastard before he can leg it again.’

They drove out past the distant foothills, towards the darkening clouds on the horizon. Eddie pulled the LandCruiser over into the farmhouse’s yard, and he and Royce approached the flat on foot. As they moved through the overgrown driveway leading to the back of the property, Royce saw the owner’s skeletal face leering at them from the window, flashes of distant lightning reflected in the glass.

Eddie stopped him with a hand. ‘I’m going to try the back way,’ he whispered. ‘Make sure Lynch doesn’t squeeze out the window again.’

Royce nodded. ‘Am I waiting for your call?’

‘No,’ Eddie said. ‘Hit him hard. And don’t let him know we’re coming.’ He slapped Royce on the back, then peeled away into the knee-high grass. Royce watched Eddie’s hunched form disappear around the rear of the building

Royce approached the dingy flat, and set his back against the exterior wall. He tried the front door to find it unlocked. Slowly, carefully, he let himself inside. The place was much like they had left it, except now the dresser drawers were pulled out across the floor. Lynch was standing above them, his back to the door, and he was packing clothes into a duffel bag. ‘Fuck, where is it?’

Royce reached for his revolver. ‘Police,’ he said. ‘Don’t move.’

Lynch glanced over his shoulder.

Royce couldn’t see the full expression on his face, but he knew the man was thinking over escape routes. Royce came in close, barrel of the revolver leading the way. ‘Let me see your hands.’

Lynch dropped a pair of ratty jeans to the floor. He took a few quick steps towards the kitchenette, but froze when he heard a tap on the glass.

Eddie was standing outside, peering in through the window above the sink. ‘Mate,’ he said, voice muted. ‘Probably best you do what the Constable says.’

A man was working the grocery store today, and he was older than Mariah, a thick pelt of hair creeping out from under his singlet.

Nicole approached the counter. 'Is Mariah here?'

'Does it look like it?' he said.

'Do you know when she'll be back?'

The man sighed, struggled off a stool, and scanned the roster stuck to the countertop. 'Tomorrow, all right?'

Nicole ambled towards the rear of the empty store. She watched the man lift his feet up onto the counter and close his eyes. When she was sure he was dozing, she began to fill her pants and socks with items from the shelves.

Nicole found Bishop in his shack.

He gave her leftovers from the gas-powered fridge, rice and tinned tuna, and the girl sat on his cot and ate with her fingers.

'Good?' Bishop asked.

Nicole nodded. 'You sure you don't want some?'

He shook his head. 'Can always make more.'

The girl glanced around the cluttered shack. Loose newspapers and magazines were collected in piles and the covers were trampled and stained with mud. Some of them featured

women in lingerie on the front cover. Others had oiled men flexing. A leather bound book sat among them and Bishop caught Nicole staring at it. 'Bible,' he said. 'Ever read it?'

Neither of Nicole's parents were church going people. 'No,' she said.

Bishop retrieved the book. He passed it to her and she thumbed the worn pages. Tiny columns of black text flickered past like ants scrambling from the broken spine.

'Looks like you've read it a lot,' she said.

Bishop shook his head. 'Wasn't mine. Stepdad owned it. Used to read it to me every night before I went to bed. Know it nearly all by heart these days.'

'Was he religious?'

'Preacher,' Bishop said. 'That's what he used to say, anyhow. But I never saw him do anything but drink himself stupid.'

'Is that why you ran away?'

'Used to lay into me some nights. When he was done with my little sister, anyhow. After she ran away, there wasn't much keeping me there at all. So I decided to leg it out. Hitchhiked my way back to the Well. Only wish I knew where she was these days.' He rubbed his forehead. 'Only part I miss.'

A kookaburra cackled outside the shack, the sound echoing across the open foothills. Nicole had been taught about the bird when she first started school. Often they would wait in the branches for a foraging magpie. Then, before the other bird consumed a found insect, the kookaburra would swoop down and steal the meal. It wasn't as if the bird couldn't kill its own prey. It simply felt compelled to scavenge off of others.

Nicole reached into her pocket and removed a packet of lollies. 'I brought this for you,' she said. 'To say thank you for the food.'

Bishop took the offering. He hefted the tiny bag from hand to hand. 'Thank you,' he said in a quiet voice.

Outside the light began to fade. Through the shack's open doorway, Nicole saw dark storm clouds gathering. Thunder crackled in the distance, and Boo began to bark.

Nicole stood up with the bowl in hand. 'Can I?' she asked.

Bishop nodded.

The dog waited for her in the underbush at the edge of the clearing. Nicole gave him the remaining leftovers and he ate hungrily, the bowl nearly tipping as he gnashed at the remaining meat. When she returned to the shack, Bishop was waiting for her on the cot, the rifle laid out over his lap.

'I want to show you something,' he said.

Back at base, they locked Lynch in the tank and gave him time to stew.

‘Wouldn’t hold it against you,’ Eddie said as Royce sat back down at his desk. ‘You know.’ He motioned towards the lock-up with his head.

‘Slogan is firmness with courtesy,’ Royce said. ‘Can’t ignore the last part.’

Eddie shrugged. ‘Could always politely beat the shit out of him.’

On the desktop Royce had laid out Lynch’s wallet, pocketknife, and car keys. The only items he had on his person when they hauled him in.

‘You see his car around back of the unit?’

‘I did,’ Eddie said. ‘I saw it, and I saw all four hubcaps. Not a Crown either.’

‘So maybe the cap I found the other day was unrelated. Maybe it was all just a coincidence.’

Eddie sipped his coffee. ‘Maybe.’

They took Lynch up into Eddie’s office and sat him down in front of the desk, the chair creaking beneath his sagging bulk. He asked for a drink and Royce poured him a glass of water from the shift office sink.

‘Now,’ Eddie said. ‘Wanna tell us why you were legging it from the pub.’

Lynch took a sip from the glass. ‘Wasn’t.’

‘Wasn’t what? Wasn’t trying to climb out a window? Wasn’t trying to escape the young Constable here?’

Royce sat down on the edge of Eddie’s desk.

Lynch eyed him up and down, scratched at the pockmarked skin beneath his three-day growth. When Royce had first seen him at the pub, the man’s hair was slicked back tight against the skull, held in place by some chemically-potent product. Now it was wild, roped strands pointing in all directions.

Eddie nudged Royce with an elbow. He took the photograph copy from his pocket and showed Lynch. ‘Ever see this girl?’

Lynch’s face tightened. ‘I ain’t saying a thing.’

‘All right,’ Eddie said. ‘If you don’t want to talk, then you can go back to the tank until you’re ready.’

Lynch grew panicked. ‘Don’t I get a lawyer or something?’

Eddie laughed. ‘Mate, too much telly. We found your little collection the other day. The panties, the photos. Besides, you assaulted an officer trying to escape, and we’ve got Royce here to back that up. You reckon a lawyer can talk you out of that?’

Lynch whimpered. The sound turned guttural, blubbering.

Eddie cringed at the sight.

‘You tell us about the girl though,’ Royce said. ‘Maybe we can work something out.’

Lynch tried to calm himself. He snorted back snot. ‘Fine. I know her.’

‘From where?’ Eddie said.

‘Boozer. She would come in every now and then and hang out. With the millers mostly.’

‘Names?’ Eddie said.

‘Mate I was rotten. Only remember her cause of how she looked.’

‘Ever chat with her?’

‘Not really.’

‘What does not really mean? You either did, or you didn’t.’

Lynch kneaded his thighs.

‘Royce, mate,’ Eddie said. ‘What’s assault on an officer get you these days? Two, maybe three years?’

‘Pretty sure it’s more like seven,’ Royce said.

Lynch’s voice was loud in the small room. ‘I fucking spoke to her, all right? But only a coupla times.’

‘When?’ Eddie said.

‘Came in for a drink one night, around a month ago. I remember she was upset about something. Was hitting the piss pretty hard. I asked her what was wrong and she told me about a blue with her boyfriend.’

‘So she was upset, was she?’

‘Crying and everything. After a few drinks, she kept talking about someone called Melanie. Kept saying she was sorry and they didn’t deserve it. That her boyfriend shouldn’t have told her.’

‘The boyfriend?’ Royce said. ‘He was Mick Hastings, right?’

Lynch looked surprised. ‘How’d you know?’

Wind purred through the open window, bringing with it the sweet scent of smoke. It reminded Royce of his very first night in the Well. The farmers were burning the cane and he stood alone in his empty lounge room, watching the orange horizon bleed into a darkening sky. Driving through town the next day on his way to the station, he had passed fields burnt clean, the soil black with ash and cinder. This is what it would look like, he had thought at the time. The end of the world.

‘That the last time you saw her?’ Eddie asked.

Lynch shook his head. ‘She came into Norm’s shop about a week later. Had a big bruise on her face. I tried to talk to her about it, but she wouldn’t have a bar of me. Just wanted some info about trading her car in for another. Told her we didn’t do that sort of thing and she would have to see the junkers out of town.’

‘She say why?’ Eddie asked.

‘Told me she broke up with her boyfriend and was leaving the Well. Needed a new ride fast. She even offered me cash for my own car. Had a huge wad of it.’

‘Is that where you got your money from?’ Royce asked. ‘Is that why you went after her?’

Lynch shook his head. ‘What? No. She gave me some money to keep my mouth shut. She said people might come talking to me about her, and I shouldn’t say a word about the junkers or nothing. Only talking to you fellas because I have to.’

‘She say anything else to you?’ Eddie said. ‘Before she left.’

‘Not really. I asked her for a goodbye drink, but she said she was busy. Thought maybe she would like the company before she left town. You know, to cheer her up. Take her mind off things.’

‘Didn’t pick you as a white knight,’ Eddie said.

A smile slithered onto Lynch’s face. ‘Between us blokes, I was honestly trying for a root.’

Royce stood up from the desk. He took out the shoeboxes from the evidence cabinet and Lynch’s face twitched when he saw them.

‘What about these?’ Royce asked. ‘You got an explanation?’

‘Look, I found all of those photos, all right? I didn’t take them.’

Royce put the boxes down on the desktop, took out the nude polaroids, and held them close to Lynch's face. 'What about these? Girls are awfully young.'

'All legal, mate. Guy selling them said so.'

'Thought you said you found them,' Eddie said. 'What about the panties? The blood on them?'

Lynch rubbed the back of his neck. 'Same fella. Sends them up from Melbourne for me. The blood's part of it all, but he told me no one was hurt.'

Eddie crossed his arms. 'Part of what?'

'You know,' Lynch said. 'They're meant to be from girls who have been done for the first time. Virgins.'

'Fucking hell,' Eddie said. 'You're a real piece of work, Andy.'

Royce returned the photos to the box. 'Why'd you run then? If all this is legal? If you had nothing to do with Rose?'

Lynch bit his fat lip. 'I've had some trouble before. Back when I was in Brisbane. Wasn't my fault. The girl said she was older than she was. When I saw you with the photo I panicked. Didn't want to get blamed for something I didn't do just because of some mix up in the past.'

'How young was the girl?' Eddie said. 'The one from Brisbane.'

Royce looked over the copy of Rose's photograph on the desktop, her smooth cheeks glowing in the light of the flashbulb. It was no surprise she was carded at the pub. She still looked like a schoolgirl. Royce couldn't help but think of his own children at home, one still unborn to this world.

Lynch dropped his eyes. 'Young enough to be a problem.'

Nicole took aim with the rifle, but struggled to keep the nub of the sight locked onto her target—a distant chunk of firewood resting atop the chopping block. Bishop crouched down behind her, put his hands over hers, and helped her get into position. Up this close she could smell the sour sweat on his dark skin.

‘Take a deep breath,’ he said. ‘When you’ve got your target, breathe out. Squeeze the trigger just as your lungs empty.’

Nicole kept focus on the firewood. Slowly she took the slack from the trigger, but the pressure wasn’t enough. She squeezed again, harder this time, and the tiny muscles in her arm tensed like rope growing taut. The weapon dry fired.

Bishop took the rifle from the girl’s hands. He slid the bolt back and loaded live shells into the breech. The process was smooth and controlled, built upon by years of repetition.

‘What do you need a gun for?’ the girl asked.

‘Food,’ Bishop said. ‘Work.’

‘What do you do?’

He locked the bolt. ‘This and that. Look after some stuff for people. Make sure no one tries to steal it.’

‘From your shack?’

Bishop passed the rifle back to the girl. In the fading storm-light the unpolished metal of the weapon was matte like a cockroach’s wing. ‘They keep it at the mines,’ he said. ‘No one’s really used them for years, but I’m still meant to keep people away. They’re built into an overlook, place called Coffin’s Reach. When it’s clear you can see the whole town from

there. Show you one time if you want.'

'Would like that,' Nicole said.

Bishop nodded. 'You ready?'

She nestled the rifle butt into the nook of her shoulder. Distant thunder rumbled, louder now. Cracks of light flashed in the dark clouds. When she pulled the trigger, the kickback nearly toppled her. Yet the target fell to the ground.

'How was that?' she asked.

'Good,' Bishop said as he squeezed the girl's shoulders. 'Good.'

She followed him up along overgrown trails, the pair of them struggling through wild guinea grass and trees growing angled on the rock face. After reaching the peak of the hills, she sat down with Bishop by her side, and they looked out over the dip of the valley below. The town looked small to her from up here, the roads like tunnels in an ant colony.

Boo trotted up the hillside after them. He sat in the shade of a nearby gum and watched them from afar with wet eyes. Beyond where the animal lay, Nicole could see a distant stretch of overhanging land, the arid earth jutting from the curved hillside like a lodged arrow head. It had to be about a kilometre wide.

'What's that,' she asked. 'Over there.'

'That's the reach. Where the mines are. You don't know it?'

'Mum never really liked me going out by myself. And she would only take me to the shops or out of town.' The place looked lifeless to the girl. 'How'd it end up like that?'

Bishop unshouldered the rifle. 'Dunno exactly. Been like that for as long as anyone can remember. When it rains real bad, you can see the water running down each side like a

waterfall. When I was little, my Mum and I used to sit out on the verandah and watch it come down. You could see it moving, almost sliding on either side. Guess that's how it happened. Just years of rain and water wearing it down.'

The dog rearranged himself beneath the tree. His sides were bellowing with each heavy breath.

'Follows you everywhere, doesn't he?' Bishop said. 'You take him to school?'

Nicole shook her head. 'Teacher doesn't like it.'

'That why you don't go?'

Nicole picked up a brittle piece of kindling. She drew loose circles in the dirt between her feet. 'I don't know. I've just had him for nearly as long as I can remember. My Mum gave him to me.'

Bishop looked away towards the town. 'Always wanted a dog,' he said. 'Good hunters. When the white folk first came they had dogs with them. Good for taking down roos and wallabies. The old single-shot rifles and muskets couldn't graze them. It was like the animal was dodging each shot. But the dogs could just chase them down. Wasn't long until the black fellas were using them too.'

'If you wanted one so much, why didn't you just get one?'

'My stepdad wouldn't let me. Said they were dirty animals. Mum used to try and argue with him about it but he would always say the same thing. As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly.'

'What does that mean?' she asked.

Something skirted through the wild grass below them. Bishop stood up with the rifle in hand. 'Over there. Look.' He was pointing to a twisted gnarl of brush, a hare almost hidden completely inside. The animal's nostrils flared rapidly as it sniffed the wind.

Bishop offered the rifle to the girl. 'Remember to breathe.'

‘I don’t know if I can,’ she said.

Bishop stilled her trembling hands, then helped her get into position. This time his finger was resting with hers on the trigger.

‘C’mon,’ Bishop said. ‘Before it gets away.’

The hare watched her over the nub of the sight.

She exhaled, pulled the trigger, and the rifle kicked in her hands.

Boo barked wildly at the stormy sky.

‘Good shot,’ Bishop said as he let her go.

When Nicole finally opened her eyes, the hare was nowhere to be seen.

Bishop unsheathed his knife. ‘C’mon then.’

As the two of them approached the brush, Nicole smelt copper in the air, tasted it at the back of her throat. It reminded her of the time she split her gums at school. An older boy had roughly pushed her against a wall, pinning her there as he ran his hands along her back and legs, and blood had filled her mouth. That’s why she had waited for him outside his house a week later with a brick. Hiding in a bush, she threw it as he passed, hard enough to split the skin above his eyes.

Bishop pointed. ‘There. Look.’

The remains of the hare lay in the dirt by his feet. The bullet had only clipped the animal’s neck and it was still alive, foot twitching. Bishop crouched down low, picked it up by the ears, and nicked the throat with his knife. A flower of blood grew in the fur.

He gutted the hare, then removed the pelt. ‘Damn it,’ he said.

Nicole’s voice was thin when she spoke. ‘What’s wrong?’

Bishop wiped the knife on his jeans. He nudged the exposed carcass with a boot.

‘Must’ve been sick. The meat’s no good.’

Beneath the fat and blood, Nicole could see dark bruises on the muscle. Bishop took a back leg in his hand, cracked the anklebone, and then tore the foot from the body. He threw the remains down towards the bottom of the hill and the hare spun wildly, limbs contorting into odd angles. Nicole watched it silently hit the ground below.

‘You all right?’ Bishop asked.

Nicole looked at him. There was a spatter of blood beneath his eye, pendulous like a tear. She nodded.

Farrow sat himself down in the quiet lounge room. He pinched a loose thread on the couch's armrest and rolled it mindlessly between his calloused fingers.

It was a windless afternoon outside and the air was thick and muggy, scented with rust. A storm was coming. And he had a feeling it would be a bad one. His thoughts lingered on the phone call yesterday afternoon. He tried to conjure a reason for Mick to call someone at the Brisbane port, but nothing came to mind.

Outside a series of thunderclaps shook the house. Farrow pulled at the loose thread and it went rigid before snapping.

The front door creaked open across the room, and Nicole flinched when she saw her father sitting there in the dull light.

'You were out when I got home,' Farrow said.

The girl's voice was quiet. 'Went to the grocer's.'

'To see Mariah again?'

The girl rubbed the dog's chin.

'I want you to go to school tomorrow,' he said. 'I know you don't want to go, and I know I can't make you. But it's what your mother would want. It's what I want.'

The girl seemed to consider this for a moment. 'Okay.'

Lynch sat in the half-light of the television set. He drifted in and out of sleep, his lips stained with tomato sauce, an open can of spaghetti hanging in his limp hand.

It had been hours since the old cop dropped him back home, but the panic had only just subsided. He hadn't done anything wrong. Not in this town, anyway. But he couldn't risk getting locked up again. He knew from experience that someone with his particular tastes struggled to survive on the inside.

On the television screen across the room, the news shifted into sign off, then static. Glass shattered violently outside the granny flat. Lynch jerked awake and the open can of spaghetti toppled from his hand. He fingered the blinds apart. The yard in front of his flat was dark, the grass slick after the rainfall earlier in the night.

More glass shattered outside.

Lynch took an old watchman's torch from his dresser, and headed out into the yard. Glass crackled under foot as he drew closer towards his car parked at the end of the driveway. The front windscreen was smashed. Cracks spread like cobwebs from a hole in the middle. Lynch's hands began to shake, the beam skittish.

An arm wrapped around his throat from behind. Hot breath stung his ear. 'I know your type. Can pick you a mile off.'

Lynch tried to speak, but the man holding him pulled tighter. He dropped the torch into the grass, light blinking out as it rolled away.

The familiar voice continued. 'You think you can hurt people and get away with it. Not when I'm around. Not in my town.'

Each breath was painful for Lynch now. He tried to pull himself free, shifting his weight downwards so as to escape the loop of the choking arm. But the man wouldn't allow it. He reached around and grabbed Lynch by the testicles.

'I want you out of here,' he said. 'You got that?'

Lynch nodded as best he could. The hand on his groin twisted and he felt a fist clip him on the back of the head. He fell forward onto all fours, his guts turning. A half-digested dinner came up through his nose and mouth, viscous stomach acid searing his throat.

'I see you around town again,' the man said. 'I will sort you out myself. No station, no tank. Nothing.'

Lynch rolled over and tried to make the man's face. But darkness slowly crept in at the edges of his vision.

Lying in bed that night, Royce listened as Anna told him about her day.

‘Spoke to the woman at the local school. She said there might be an opening coming up. She needs to take some time off to go and see her sick mother in Victoria. Only temporary, but the money will help.’

Royce rolled over onto his back. In the dim light he saw Anna sitting upright against the headboard, legs propped up on pillows. ‘And you reckon you can handle it?’ he asked.

‘Should be fine. Not many kids enrolled anyhow. They even have to combine some of the grades.’

‘What would you do with Shaun?’

‘He could come with me. Sit at the back of the class while I teach.’

Royce placed a hand on Anna’s stomach. He thought of his unborn child floating inside the darkness of her.

‘I know you’re worried about the baby,’ she said. ‘But she’ll be fine. I promise to stop if I start feeling tired. I won’t let it get as bad as last time.’

‘Okay,’ Royce said.

As they lay there in silence, his mind began to drift. A neighbour across the street dumped his empty stubbies into the bin, and the glass clinked loudly. The sound triggered a memory for Royce, one that had been coming to mind more and more these last few days.

When he was a young boy, maybe eight or nine, he had awoken to find someone else in the house with him. His parents were out for a late night dinner, and they had left him home alone. At first he thought it was them coming home. But when he heard the slam of

drawers, and the smash of glass, he got up to investigate. He remembered the house exactly as it was that night, near pitch black in the evening dark, the only light his father's desk lamp at the end of the hallway. His heart had been hammering as he drew closer, and he wanted to turn around, go back to bed and hide. Yet something kept him moving forward.

In his father's office he found a strange man searching through files and folders, a smashed whiskey bottle by his feet. When he saw Royce, he reached inside his jacket, and pushed him against the wall. 'Father home?' he asked. Royce told him no, and he let him go. 'Stay in your room,' the man had said. 'Until they get home. No need to call the cops.'

When his parents finally did arrive back from dinner, the man was gone, along with some of his father's work files. 'Your dad knew the man,' his mother told him years later, not long before she died. 'Just another detective from work. All just a bit of confusion.' But as she spoke, she never met Royce's eyes.

He sat with the stock of the rifle across his lap, polishing the wood of the weapon with a rag and linseed oil. The flickering candle left his face streaked in shadow. When he was finished, he reassembled the weapon, and leant it against the shack wall. He liked to keep the rifle close at hand. His stepfather was still out there somewhere, searching for him, and he knew it was only time until he stepped through that door.

Later that night he struggled to sleep. He lay on the bed in nothing but shorts and a singlet, his hands behind his head like a pillow. Raindrops began to drum on the roof again, and soon the returning storm was like white noise around him. It filled his ears and swallowed his thoughts.

Bishop closed his eyes and imagined he was the girl, hidden in the depths of the reach. If she could think, he wondered. If she could feel. Would it be like this?

IX

For over a week the investigation lay cold.

Royce arrived at work on Tuesday the 10th of December to find Walker talking on the phone, a woman's soft voice lilting from the receiver. He passed Royce a shift note as soon as he walked in. A local address was written across the page, but the call time was hours ago.

'What's this?' Royce asked.

Walker shooed him away with a hand, laughing down the line at something the woman said. Royce turned the note over to see McIntyre's signature.

'Where's McIntyre?' he asked. 'This should've been dealt with already.'

Walker cupped the phone with his hand. 'Mate, can't you see I'm busy.'

Royce tapped the signature.

'I don't know. Haven't seen him since last night.'

'He on the clock?'

Walker sighed. 'Of course. But when has that stopped him.'

Royce pocketed the note. As he left the station through the front door, he noticed tinsel taped above the inner-doorframe, the garland limp and sickly in the heat. An attached placard said: *The Most Wonderful Time of the Year*. Christmas was still two weeks away, and

admittedly a lot could change in that time, but Royce thought Eddie was being a little hopeful with that one.

He took the LandCruiser out onto the road. Iridescent puddles lingered on the blacktop, the water slicked with oil. It had been storming on-and-off the last few days, but the rain had finally eased early this morning, the sky now a cloudless blue. On the road in front of him, a snub-nosed hauler skirted the shoulder, spraying Royce's windscreen with mud and diesel smoke. A sticker on the back tray read: *Support Your Local Canegrowers.*

When he pulled up outside the call-out address, Royce's stomach dropped. The signs had changed since last time, but the messages remained the same—everyone will go to hell, and it's not a very pleasant place. An old man met Royce at the door. Compared to the signs out front, he was decidedly plain, his thinning hair combed flat against the skull, dress shirt done up to the top button.

'Alone?' he asked, staring past him.

Royce looked over his shoulder. The front window of the house across the street was smashed. 'There seems to have been some confusion at the station,' Royce said. 'You made a report earlier this morning?'

The man nodded furiously. 'Someone driving up and down the street at two in the bloody morning. I tell you, things have gone downhill around here.'

'Sir, this is a public road. People are allowed to use it during the night. Now, if they were speeding—'

The guy hissed between his teeth. ‘Not bloody stupid, am I? They were throwing things as they did it. Smashed the neighbours window. Fella I know told me they did more a few streets away. Even tore up someone’s lawn.’

‘Did they smash any of your windows, sir?’

‘No. This house is a holy house. Got protection here.’

‘Just a concerned citizen, then,’ Royce said.

The man took a deep breath, his chest jutting forward. ‘Some of us have to be.’

Royce checked over the damaged house before heading back to base. No one answered the front door when he knocked, and the carport was empty. Out in the yard he found a rust-coloured brick. When he kicked it with his boot it barely moved.

‘Thanks for the call,’ Royce said as he unlocked the LandCruiser.

The man was leaning against his front gate. ‘I reckon I know who did it. It’s those bloody millers. Spend all their time boozing, smoking, hooning about. Need more God and less drink. That’s the whole problem with this bloody town. If it were up to me, I would shut down that eyesore pub and put up something useful.’

The old man straightened one of his many signs along the fence. This one said: *Sodomites will burn*. He smiled, pleased with himself.

Farrow was still in bed when the phone rang.

He marched the hall, pausing for a moment by the girl's open door. Through the crack he could see the empty bed, and he tried to recall hearing her leave.

He took the call in the kitchen. 'Hello?'

'Will, it's Pete.' His voice was strained. 'Not coming to work today, mate. You should do the same.'

'What's happened?' Farrow said.

Pete whispered to someone unknown, the sound muffled by his hand. 'Look, I don't have time to talk about it. Work's just off, okay? Trust me on this, mate.'

The line went dead.

Farrow grabbed his keys and headed outside. The ute's engine had been giving him grief for the last week or so, and today was no different. He turned the key again and again. Eventually the engine groaned to life with a spit of exhaust smoke.

On the way to the mill he dropped into Norm's servo. He found the man in the attached mechanic's shop, working on a raised Ford, and thick lines of grease streaked his arms and face.

'Will, mate,' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

'Ute's giving me a little trouble,' he said. 'You mind having a quick look?'

Norm wiped his hands on his overalls. 'Just need to check if you're good for it. Don't mind either way. But I don't want to write it up until after you pay. You know, with the missus on my back at the moment.'

Farrow took out his wallet. He thrust the money into the man's huge hands. 'I'm good for it,' he said.

Headed back to his ute parked out on the road, Farrow spotted a familiar face filling up their car at the servo. 'Mate,' Hollister said. 'Haven't seen you since the strike meet. How you been?'

Farrow slowed. He kept the pump between him and the man. 'Working.'

'Yeah? How things going there?'

He was silent.

Hollister looked around the servo. He took the fuel nozzle out of his vehicle and hung it back up on the hook. 'I know what you're thinking,' he said. 'Not supposed to be talking, Wayne's orders and all. But I ain't having a bar of it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I dunno,' he said. 'Wayne. The strike. It's all starting to get too much. I know he's doing it for the good of the mill and all. But there's a line, you know? Only so much a man can take. Few of the other fellas are starting to feel the same way. Thinking about going to Sydney for a bit and seeing my mum,' he continued. 'Change of scenery might do me good.'

A truck pulled up on the road outside the servo. The millers sitting in the front cab looked over Farrow and Hollister, then sped off again, tyres squawking on the bitumen.

Hollister took out his keys. 'Look I better get going.'

'If you're hurting for work,' Farrow said. 'I might be able to talk to someone at the mill. They can always do with more men.'

Hollister drew close and Farrow noticed he was stone cold sober, maybe for the first time in years. 'Nah, mate,' he said. 'It's too late for that. You just take care, all right? Look after yourself and your girl.'

Once Norm had finished with the ute, Farrow drove across town for work.

He found Johnson on the mill floor, sitting among the quiet machines, smoke in hand.

‘Hoping you would show up,’ the kid said.

‘Where is everybody?’ Farrow asked.

‘Don’t know. Turned up this morning and the place was pretty much empty. Only Evans and Hunter was here.’

Two millers stood at the conveyor head. They leant against the safety railing and whispered between themselves.

‘Anders say anything?’ Farrow asked.

‘Didn’t show up,’ Johnson said. ‘Called a few of the others and they said they weren’t coming in either. Someone smashed their places up overnight.’

Pete’s phone call was starting to make sense.

The younger man stamped out his cigarette and stood up. ‘Look, Will. Anders isn’t here, neither is Pete. What do you reckon? No point us all hanging around.’

The other men looked at Farrow expectantly.

‘Go home,’ he said. ‘I’ll try and sort things out.’

Nicole watched the schoolhouse from across the road.

A teenage boy stood by the open window, and he threw books across the room at a younger child, laughing the whole while. He towered over the children around him. With a town like the Well, older students were often forced into a combined class, no matter their age. Nicole was the oldest girl currently enrolled and sometimes the teenage boys would grab her from behind, whisper things into her ear like ‘gissus a kiss’ or ‘show us what you’ve got down there.’ Often they would push her to the ground afterwards and laugh.

She wandered across town, down past the church and towards the mill, and soon stumbled upon a large farmhouse standing alone in the ravaged fields. From the road she could see that the curtains were drawn in every window, and the driveway was empty. With the coat-hanger still at home, she had no choice but to work her way around back, trying every window until she found one unlocked.

After pulling herself inside, she began to shut the frame again. But the wood slipped out of her grasp and the window came down hard. Glass shattered inwards across her bare forearms. She felt no pain, but hot blood rushed down her fingers, the fat droplets staining the pale carpet beneath her feet.

She cleaned herself up in the bathroom, wrapping her wounds with a bandage she found beneath the sink. The ache was beginning to grow now, a throbbing that rose and fell

with the beat of her heart, and she felt herself trembling. As she watched the last curls of blood disappear down the drain, she steadied herself on the countertop. Something began to drip down her face and at first she thought she may have cut her cheek. But in the mirror she could see she was crying. What would her father say? Mariah? Bishop? Even though all three showed her attention, she still had her doubts they would understand why she came to places like this, why she was the way she was.

After what had happened, she didn't dare leave through another window. So she unlocked the back door from inside and headed out into the rear yard. Making her way around towards the front of the house, she noticed a spew-green car now sitting in the drive. A hand clamped down on her shoulder from behind, and someone pulled her to the ground.

A muscular man in a police uniform towered above her. His round face was impassive, eyes glacial blue. 'Don't you dare move,' he said.

The same stooped publican greeted Royce at Keg's. 'Back already,' he said. 'You after that drink now?'

Royce sat down next to a miller propped up on the bar, the man nursing his bitter dregs to avoid the heat outside. 'Actually,' Royce said. 'I'm looking for some smokes.'

'Ask someone else, mate. Gave up years ago. Doctor's orders.'

Royce picked up a packet off the counter. He tossed them to the man underhand.

'Where do you keep them?' Royce asked. 'Out back? Under the taps?'

The publican rubbed his freckled neck with a hand. 'No idea what you're talking about.'

'Don't bullshit me, mate. You getting booze under the table too? Maybe keeping the difference? Might have to have a chat with the owner about it all. See what he thinks. Maybe he can pick you up from the station.'

The publican raised his hand. 'All right. Keep it down, will you? Don't need to go yelling about it.'

'I don't really care what you're doing,' Royce said. 'I just want to know who's bringing you the stuff.'

'Can't tell you, mate,' the publican said. 'It's complicated. I'm not in on nothing, but I know I get paid enough to keep my eyes shut. You know what I'm saying?'

Royce said he did.

‘I don’t deal with orders or anything like that,’ he continued. ‘A guy comes in and drops off the booze and ciggies once a week. Sometimes the boxes have shipping labels on them from other places. Sometimes they don’t. All I know is I don’t kick up a fuss.’

‘Owner know the stuff is hot?’

‘Old-school Well fella through and through. Doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who would do that sort of thing.’

Royce took notes. ‘And the delivery guy?’

The publican shook his head. ‘He’s real familiar with the owner. I don’t want to get him into trouble, and I don’t want to end up in the middle of all that shit.’

Royce took his cuffs out.

The publican backed away from the bar. ‘C’mon, mate. Go easy.’

‘The delivery guy.’

‘Like I said, I can’t do that. But if you wanna know, all you gotta do is check the Squats. Fella who delivers the booze, sells to the boongs too.’

The look on the man’s face was enough to convince Royce he was telling the truth. Before leaving he asked him one more question. ‘Who’s the owner of this place anyway?’

The publican wiped out a glass with the washrag. ‘Wayne,’ he said. ‘Wayne Hastings.’

Farrow walked up through Pete's churned yard, the grass out front torn in loose circles, muddy soil sprayed up against the house. Someone had smashed in the windows overnight and the fly screens were left torn and gaping.

Pete was pacing the lounge room. 'Will, what are you doing here?'

'Door was unlocked. Everything okay?'

'Mate, go home,' Pete said. 'It's all good. Everything's under control.'

Glass crunched beneath Farrow's feet. Pete's wife would have to seriously reconsider her no-shoe-rule. 'You see who did it?'

Pete sighed. 'Heard a crash in the middle of the night. Was asleep when it happened. Nearly gave me a goddamn heart attack. Came out here to see what was happening and I found a heap of bricks on the floor. Another came through right after and nearly hit me on the head. Bastards were driving in circles out there throwing them.'

Farrow surveyed the room. Above the light switch there was a brick lodged in the wall. 'You turn on the light?' Farrow asked. 'When you came in here to check on the noise?'

Pete looked confused. 'Course I did.'

Farrow tugged the brick from the hole in the wall. It was just above head height.

Pete's wife spoke up from the doorway. She was wearing a sleeveless t-shirt and a pair of stone-washed jeans, neither fully fitting her heavy frame. A young boy peered through her legs. 'Gonna head off now,' she said. 'You all right, Pete?'

Pete nodded. 'Yeah, we're fine.'

She avoided Farrow's gaze. 'Make sure you call the police,' she said, voice quivering. 'We got kids living here, Pete. We can't have this.'

He nodded slowly, then watched his wife disappear from sight. Farrow heard a small child's voice say something indecipherable just before the slam of the front door. Farrow remembered his own daughter at that age—quieter than the other children he knew, her eyes cold like his own.

When Farrow tried to open Anders' motel room door, a wheezing voice called out to him from behind. 'Hey buddy, he's not in.'

Farrow turned to see a man emerging from the front office. His thumbs were hooked into the belt loops of his pants and his bulging stomach led him forward like a divining rod.

'You know where he went?'

'No idea,' the man said. 'Must've left last night. I don't know what happened, but I came in this morning and my fucking place was trashed. Young fella working reckons he didn't see nothing. Called the coppers but they told him not to worry about it. Fucking useless pricks.'

Farrow had noticed the broken window as soon as he pulled into the motel. It had been patched up with newspaper, but there still remained a dark splash of something viscid along the windowsill.

'Must've copped him something fierce,' the man said. 'Spent all morning trying to clean that up.'

'Let me guess,' Farrow said. 'Someone throwing bricks.'

The owner looked surprised. 'How'd you know?'

A low fence behind the motor motel enclosed an unused pool, florets of algae drifting on the surface. Farrow eased himself over the pickets, and stalked towards Anders' bathroom window. Memories of his childhood surged—he and Pete breaking into the farmer's house as children, roaming the Well from sun-up to sundown.

After dropping down inside, he tore the cardboard and newspaper from the windowsill, light suddenly filling the room. The place was in disarray. Linen lay tangled at the foot of the mattress and Anders' personal papers were strewn along the floor.

Farrow knew in his gut the man wasn't coming back.

Before leaving, he checked the drawers on the desk. Inside there was a sealed envelope, a familiar header printed along the top: *QBI Importers*. He pocketed it and kept searching. At the bottom of the bin he found crumpled balls of paper. He opened them across his thigh and spread them flat with his palms. A different message was written across each, but the sentiment was the same—*fuck off piker cunt, die you piece of shit, watch your back*.

After Royce finished up work for the day, he headed out to the Squats.

His VW wasn't equipped for off-road driving and the loose suspension clattered over the dirt track, his head pounding against the shallow roof with every divot. By the time he reached the little clutch of cottages below the hillside he could feel a knot in his back the size of a fist.

Like last time, he found Gabe inside the chapel, still wearing a dress shirt and shorts. He was trying to balance the uneven leg of the heavy altar with a folded piece of newspaper, but the pulp material couldn't handle the load.

'Fold it over again,' Royce said. 'Like you're making a paper boat. Gives it more support.'

Gabe followed the suggestion. The altar stood sturdy.

'Seen someone break open a car window with newspaper,' Royce continued. 'Folded it over and over again to make a club, until it was strong enough to shatter glass. It's why they don't have newspapers in some maximums.'

Gabe stood up and wringed his hands. 'The things you learn on the job, hey.'

'Speaking of. You got a minute?'

'You find another car?'

'Actually,' Royce said. 'I'm looking for your little brother.'

Charlie was inside the cottage he shared with his uncle, lying on a cot with a dog-eared paperback, legs propped up against the wall.

Royce sat down next to the boy, and he noticed the linen beneath him was fresh, the pillows plump and clean. You have to look after what you've got, Royce thought. When you've got very little at all.

'What you reading there, Charlie?' Royce asked.

The boy looked up at him and smiled. He passed Royce the paperback. It was a coverless copy of *Red Harvest*. 'Good book,' Royce said. 'One of my Mum's favourites. But isn't it a little old for you?'

'Nah,' he said. 'I like it. Almost finished it a second time.'

Gabe walked over to the kitchenette, and set the kettle on the hotplate. 'Charlie's always been a big reader. My uncle picks up a lot of books second hand. Some of them are donations from in town.' He pointed to an improvised shelf by the front door, the supporting frame made from off-cut wood and besser brick.

'Your uncle seems a good guy,' Royce said.

Gabe opened a box of teabags. 'Had a rough life. His father was the black sheep of the family. Cattle farmer's son who married the help. Cuppa?'

Royce nodded. 'Thanks.'

He brought a mug over. It was bitter, just the way Royce liked it. 'I was actually wondering, Charlie, if you could give me a hand. I wanted to find out who gave you alcohol the other night.'

The boy sat up and looked at his brother across the room.

'I don't want to get anyone in trouble,' Royce said. 'I'm just trying to find some information. You don't even have to give me a name. Just tell me where they're from. Here? Or out of town?'

Charlie picked at his fraying book. 'I think he lives in town. Sometimes he comes up here and meets us, tries to sell us stuff. Ciggies, drinks. My uncle chased him away at first but everyone knows where you can find him. We went to see him the other day and we took some drinks off him.'

'Took them?' Royce said.

The boy's voice was indignant. 'We was going to pay him back. But we just didn't have the money yet. He used to keep the stuff locked up in the boot of his car. But he drives a ute now. One of my friends was talking to him while the rest of us nicked it out of the tray. Didn't mean to run into him again so soon, but.'

'What do you mean?'

'Fella trying to fight us outside the pub. That's him.'

Mick Hastings. No wonder the publican didn't want to tell me the name of the delivery man, Royce thought. His uncle owned the place. 'This car the guy drove, before the ute. Was it a hatchback?'

The boy looked confused.

'A Japanese car,' Royce said. 'Small thing, curved boot.'

Charlie nodded. 'Used to keep all the stuff where the tyre was supposed to go.'

Royce took out the photo of Rose. 'This girl ever with him?'

Charlie squinted. 'I think so. Sometimes a girl would drive the car and she kinda looked like that.'

'Was she there last time you saw him? Or maybe even the time before that?'

He shook his head. 'Haven't seen her in a long time.'

Royce finished his tea. 'You've been a big help today, Charlie.'

The boy grabbed Royce's arm before he could stand. 'You gotta promise,' he said. 'You gotta promise you won't tell anyone about this. I just don't want him to hurt me. The

guy always told us to be careful. Said he would come after us if we told the cops about what he was doing.'

'Won't say a word,' Royce said. 'Promise.'

Seven in the evening, dusk fading into night. The girl should've been home by now.

Farrow paced the kitchen with a beer in hand. He moved the pot of soup from the cooling stove to the washboard, then stirred the liquid to break apart the skin. One more hour, but no more. After that he would have to start driving through the dark streets looking for her.

He took a second beer from the fridge, turned on the television, and sat down in the lounge room. The evening news began to play out across the screen—Australians still missing after an earthquake in Mexico City, a child's body found in Pinkenba next to the Brisbane River. None of it meant anything to Farrow.

On his lap was the envelope he found in Anders' motel room. He had opened it earlier to find a letter inside, dated a week ago. Farrow didn't understand every detail, but the gist of it was clear. QBI were after the mill, and they were ready to pay whatever was required. It didn't add up though. Why would a Brisbane importer want the Mill? And why was Mick calling them about the new man running the place?

The phone rang in the kitchen.

A woman's voice came through the handset. 'Will.'

Farrow nearly dropped the receiver. 'Molly, I—' The words wouldn't come. He stood there in silence, the phone pressed against his ear as if that somehow bridged the distance that lay between them.

'It's Nicole,' she said. 'Something's wrong.'

Sergeant Knowles was waiting for him out front of the police station, sitting on the verandah stairs, his arms crossed above his solid stomach.

‘She all right?’ Farrow asked.

Knowles stood up. ‘She’ll live.’

The Sergeant led him through the station and towards a private office. Nicole was waiting behind the desk, fresh bandages wrapped around her forearms. Farrow dropped to one knee and took her frail wrists into his hands.

Knowles lingered in the doorway. ‘Don’t look bad enough for stitches. Might want to take her out of town to double check though. Honestly, she was lucky not to hit anything major.’

‘She in trouble?’ Farrow asked.

‘Know the fella who owns the place. He’s out of town until next week, but I got one of the young constables to board it up. I’ll talk to him about it all when he gets back. Window will have to be replaced though.’

‘I’ll bring you the money,’ he said.

The Sergeant glanced down the hall. ‘Had a few reports lately of break and enters. Nothing big. But it’s something we still gotta look into. But if they dropped cold...’ He looked at Farrow. ‘Well, we wouldn’t have to keep searching.’

Farrow nodded.

‘She’s what?’ Knowles said. ‘Nine? Ten?’

‘Twelve,’ he said.

‘Girl like that should be in school. Understand me?’

Farrow helped her up out of the chair. ‘I’ll look after it.’

The girl was silent on the drive back home. She leant against the passenger side door and stared past her reflection in the glass.

Farrow watched her out of the corner of his eye as he drove. ‘You told them to call your mother.’

Nicole scratched at the skin beneath her bandages. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘What the hell were you doing in there?’

‘I don’t know.’

Farrow changed gears. If only Molly was here. She would know what to say to the girl, always did. She just had a knack for that kind of thing. It was one of the reasons he first fell for her back in Brisbane. Farrow would just sit there with Molly by his side, and she would do enough talking for the two of them.

They had first met in the early seventies, after Farrow moved to the city for some bigger fights. It was the first time he had ever left the Well, and he was travelling alone. His father had decided to stay back home to work at the mill, telling Farrow he had taught him everything he needed to know. ‘Besides,’ his father had said, ‘Brisbane’s no place for a simple man like me.’

A promoter put him up in a dodgy apartment complex in the outer suburbs, and the man’s niece met Farrow at Roma street station to show him there. She never left, and he didn’t want her to. When Molly started talking about a future together, Farrow knew he needed money. But throwing fists barely earned a living for him alone. There was no way he could support a young family. That’s why he took the dive when it was offered to him. ‘I know about you and me niece,’ the promoter had said. ‘Three rounds on your first fight and all is forgiven. Let me sort the details. We’ll both walk away happy.’

Through the windscreen of the ute, Farrow saw movement beyond the bitumen's edge, glowing eyes watching him from the scrub. The ute's headlights uncloaked a glaring wildcat and the animal arched its back as the vehicle passed.

Later that night, there was a knock out front. Farrow opened the door to see Mariah standing on the verandah, rubbing her arms despite the humidity. 'Will,' she said. 'It's late. Everything all right?'

Farrow opened the door wider. 'Can we talk? It's Nicole.'

Mariah followed him into the kitchen. She ran her hand over the dusty tabletop as she sat down.

Farrow put the kettle on, then drew two cups from the cupboard. 'Sorry,' he said. 'Been a while since we've had anyone around.'

'It's fine,' she said. 'Honestly, I was surprised you called. It's been how long now?'

He sat down opposite. 'Nicole told me about you and her. Said you've been spending some time together.'

Mariah leant forward and her blouse dipped, exposing the slight curve of her breasts. Farrow felt something turn inside him. But he had just spoken to Molly, and he had to remember that.

'Look, Will,' she said. 'I know we've had—'

He shook his head. 'It's good for her. Glad to see she's talking to someone.' Farrow picked at the calluses on his knuckles. 'She needs her mother.'

'Things will sort themselves out,' she said. 'Nicole's a good kid.'

Farrow felt his face growing hot. 'Yeah. But so was I.'

The kettle began to whistle in the kitchen. The sound was quiet at first. But slowly, over time, it grew shrill and unbearable.

X

When Royce revisited the shop front the next morning, he found Mick's ute gone, the caravan door locked tight. But movement further down the row caught his eye as he headed back towards the road. A shop curtain swelled in the building beyond the next, the material catching a draft, and Royce stood there and waited for it to settle again.

He drove across town to the pub and headed inside. Royce scanned the crowd for familiar faces and saw Harry's hulking frame at the back of the room. He was sitting next to another man about Eddie's age, wire-rimmed glasses perched on his thin face.

Royce made his way over. 'Must be Wayne. Nice to meet you.'

Wayne smiled to reveal tiny teeth, each one perfect and bone white. 'So you're the young lad everyone's been talking about. How do you like your new beat?'

Royce felt Harry watching him. The man gripped his schooner tight, veins like a roadmap down his thick arm.

'You mind if we have a chat outside?' Royce said to Wayne. 'Alone.'

They stood outside on the front verandah of the pub, the floorboards beneath their feet stained dark by spilt drinks, ground cigarettes, blood. Royce toed a chip in the wood, and wondered how hard a head might have to hit the ground to leave a mark like that. But you already know, he thought.

‘Nice place you got here,’ he said.

Wayne lit a cigarette and leant against the wall. ‘Place is a Well institution. Not exactly perfect, but it does the job.’

‘Gets the regulars pissed and ready for a fight?’

He threw the match out into the dirt lot. ‘Something like that. So what can I do for you, Constable?’

‘When I saw Mick the other day,’ Royce said. ‘He told me you owned some of the old shops near the edge of town.’

‘That’s right,’ Wayne said. ‘Bought them up recently. I was born and bred in the Well, lad. Hate seeing it fail, but I hate it more when people come in and treat it poorly. Best that stuff stays local, you know what I mean?’

‘Still, that’s quite a bit of property for a miller’s wage.’

Wayne ashed his cigarette. ‘I’m sure you didn’t pull me out here to discuss real estate.’

Royce nodded. ‘Seen your nephew recently?’

‘Not since a day or two after I picked him up from the station. You boys did a real number on him. Kid could barely open his eye.’

‘What about work?’ Royce said.

Wayne exhaled. ‘Strike going on. Should know that.’

Royce thought about the delivery truck he had seen on the road yesterday, and tried to hide his confusion. He would have to pay the mill a visit after finishing up here. ‘So no sign

of Mick then?’ he said. ‘For nearly a fortnight now? Plenty of time for a boy like that to get into trouble.’

‘What is it you think Mick’s done?’

‘Just need to chat about his old girlfriend. So if you see him, can you make sure you give us a call?’

Wayne sucked the last life from his smoke. ‘Doubt I’ll run into him soon. If I do though, I’ll pass on the word.’ The man went to leave, but Royce grabbed his forearm. ‘Look,’ Wayne said. ‘I’m quite busy.’

‘Just one last thing,’ Royce said. ‘Tell Mick to stop selling to the Squats. We know about the booze and ciggies.’

Wayne narrowed his eyes, shook himself free of Royce’s grip. ‘Sorry, lad. Don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.’

After watching him disappear back inside the dark guts of the pub, Royce hurried down the verandah steps and into the front lot. He sat low in the driver’s seat of his VW, and waited. Only a few minutes later, Harry exited through the front batwings, headed for his Charger. He started her up and pulled out onto the road, busted bumper skirting the gutter. Royce followed the man at a safe distance.

Harry led him through the heart of town, along Caleb’s Road and down into a side street. He stopped only once along the way, pulling his Charger over outside an unfamiliar house. Royce saw Harry watching the place through the rear window. The man’s face was pulled tight. Before leaving again, Royce wrote down the house’s address in his notebook.

This time they travelled out past the mill and towards the foothills. The land around here was sparse, the greenery lost amid stones and arid earth. Harry took a sharp left onto an unpaved road. The dirt ruts wound their way through the open fields, and towards a rocky outcrop cut into the foothill.

Royce eased the VW to a stop and watched the Charger spit dust as it grew smaller and smaller. A crooked sign nearby marked the trail and Royce squinted to make the letters in the rear vision mirror. *Coffin's Reach* was written across the wood in broad strokes.

Nicole peeled off her bandages. The jagged cuts beneath were surprisingly bloodless in the harsh light of the bathroom, and when she touched the swollen skin around the wounds there was only a twinge of pain.

She showered, then dressed herself in shorts and a long-sleeved shirt, and headed to the kitchen. Mariah was standing above the hissing stove, and the smell of bacon and eggs filled the air. Nicole's stomach roiled in hunger.

'You want some?' the woman asked. 'Hope so. Cooked way too much.'

'Where's Dad?' Nicole asked.

Mariah switched off the gas and began to plate the food. She put the meal down on the table in front of Nicole. 'Your father is at work. He asked me to take you to school today and I thought maybe you could do with a good breakfast before we left. Getting too skinny.'

Boo nudged her underneath the table and she passed him a piece of fatty bacon.

'Called the school this morning,' Mariah said. 'Told them you'd been under the weather lately. But that you would be back from now on.'

'I don't have any books,' she said. 'Or pencils.'

'We can pick some up on the way.'

The girl fingered a chip in her plate. It was a wedding gift given to her mother, one part of a larger set, each featuring a native bird across the front. On this one there was a peacock, and the tail was fanned wide to show its colours. Nicole thought it beautiful, if broken. Maybe that's why her mother had left it behind.

Mariah parked her car outside the schoolhouse. On the footpath beside them two boys jostled each other until they both toppled over onto the mangy nature strip.

Nicole shifted in her seat.

‘You all set?’ Mariah asked.

‘I left something at home,’ Nicole said. ‘We have to go back.’

The boys hauled themselves up out of the grass, and began to throw stones at the tin roof of the schoolhouse, the collisions brittle. ‘Oi. You two,’ the teacher yelled from the open doorway. ‘Get inside now.’

‘It won’t be that bad,’ Mariah said. ‘I’ll be waiting here this afternoon to pick you up. We can go out afterwards if you like.’

Nicole tried to still her shaking legs with a hand and the sleeve of her shirt pulled up beyond the wrist. She hurriedly pulled the cuff back down.

‘My god,’ Mariah said. ‘Your father didn’t say how bad they were.’

They both sat there in silence until the bell rang.

Mariah started the ignition. ‘We’ll try again tomorrow, okay?’

Farrow swung by the mill after leaving the house.

He pulled up in the work yard to find Evans talking to a young cop he didn't recognise, and neither one paid him attention. Farrow waited and watched from the ute. When they finished up, the cop wrote something down in a notepad, shook Evans hand, and then drove away in a faded VW bug.

Farrow approached the office. 'What was that about?'

'Dunno,' Evans said. 'Looking for young Hastings.'

He turned and squinted against the sun. Down the far end of the bitumen he saw the reflective glint of the cop's vehicle leaving the back road, headed towards town. 'You tell him Mick's not working.'

'Mate, no one's working. Been here since bloody sun-up. Johnson came in for a bit, but even he's buggered off.'

'You try and call anyone?'

Evans shook his head. 'No point. Farms ain't delivering.'

'What do you mean?' Farrow asked.

'Didn't you hear? Farmers have started copping it now. Smashed windows, busted cars. One poor fella even had his bloody tractor set on fire. They're too afraid to work with us. Too afraid to even call the cops.'

Inside the mill house Farrow saw the machines were motionless, dusty wind licking at the gangways above. He couldn't recall it ever being this quiet at the mill. Not in the years he'd been alive anyway.

Something tickled the nape of his neck, maybe an insect or a fly, but when Farrow scratched at the sunburnt skin there was nothing there.

Royce came home to find Anna and Shaun waiting for him in the lounge room. His wife wore a summer dress pulled tight around the waist with a leather belt, and his son was in a pair of brand new overalls.

‘We better leave soon,’ Anna said. ‘Or we’ll miss the movie.’

Royce stammered over his words. A couple of days ago Anna had brought up the idea of a night out again, and Royce had agreed. Work had been slowing down recently, but for some reason the plan still slipped his mind.

‘You forgot, didn’t you?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Just running late. Give me a minute.’

Royce headed to the bathroom. As he changed out of his uniform, he saw his reflection in the mirror above the sink, face unshaven, hair dirty and clumped. A feeling of déjà vu washed over him. You’re looking more and more like your old man, he thought. In those months before his accident.

The main street of Warwick was busy for a weeknight, and it took Royce a long while to find a park near the cinema. Shaun sat on Anna’s lap and gazed out at the lit sidewalk, the people on the pavement milling past restaurants and bars.

He pointed towards a busker on the street corner. ‘Look at the guitar man, Mummy,’ he said. ‘Look.’

Anna turned to Royce and laughed, and for a brief second he saw her as she once was, in those first years they knew each other. Before the girl in the Valley, the NSW detectives, the transfer.

The movie was rubbish for the most part, and Royce found himself quickly losing interest. But in the half-light he saw Shaun watching the screen intently, eyes wide amid a soundtrack of sword clangs and bombastic strings, and when he smiled Royce found himself doing the same. The young actress featured throughout was familiar to him, but he couldn't place where he knew her. For a moment the camera lingered on a close-up—her dark fringe framed a round face, eyes so pale they were almost the colour of smoke. Soon he began to think of Rose, or at least how she looked in the photograph Madeline had given him. Then another face drifted out from memory. This one bruised, beaten, her forehead cracked like the cement that had inflicted the killing blow.

The image on the movie screen faded to black during a scene change and the cinema was left in darkness for a brief moment. Royce found himself breathing heavy. His face was slicked with sweat. Anna leant close to him. 'You all right?'

'Just got to use the bathroom,' he said.

Royce headed outside into the fresh air. The street was even busier this time of night. A group of young women giggled by the sidewalk and struggled to keep upright in their high-heeled shoes. All of them wore tiaras and ribbons that said: *Hen's Night*. Further down the street two men stood beneath a streetlight and leered at them, shouting occasionally—'Sweetie, hey sweetie. You sure you want to get married? You and your friends don't know what you're missing out on.'

Neither group noticed Royce as he passed.

Down a curling side street he saw a cluster of neon signs outside a café, one of them an illuminated coffee cup. He made his way inside. The place was empty except for a lone nighthawk by the front door, and his eyes were hidden by the brim of his cap.

Royce sat down at the counter and ordered a black coffee.

The older woman behind the till served it up. 'Look tired,' she said, scratching at her perm. 'You from around here?'

Royce blew into his steaming cup. 'Just passing through.'

'So where you from then?'

With the way he was feeling, Royce didn't need the small talk. But the woman clearly loved a good chat, and he knew she wouldn't let up until she was done. 'Caleb's Well.'

The woman began to wipe down the countertop. 'My grandparents used to live out that way, bless their souls. I remember the old mill and everything. Place seems a lot different these days. From what people say, anyhow.'

'Honestly, I wouldn't know. Haven't lived there long.'

'I remember the stories my Oma used to tell me. When she was a little girl, they opened the gold mines. Some rich bloke from Sydney built them thinking he was getting in on a boom. But it was all a waste. He spent years digging into the hills to find nothing at all. Ended up killing a fella when the shaft collapsed. But that's the Well for you. History of bad luck. Place will chew you up and spit you out. Been that way ever since they built it.'

'What do you mean?' Royce asked.

The woman leant over the counter, excited to be spinning the yarn. 'Well, from what I understand, the settlers had nothing but trouble. Someone nearly burnt the place down with a cane fire one time, and it left half the buildings lost. And then years after that a couple of fellas came through and killed one of the farm owners. Apparently he had been holding back their pay. Coppers refused to do anything about it so they took it into their own hands.'

The nighthawk began to snore loudly from his booth across the cafe, broad nose saddled from a fight long ago.

The woman continued. ‘Course, last time I visited the place was booming. So things were a bit different. But that was before the Maloney shrimp farms opened up and took away a lot of the young fellas. You ever been to Maloney? Nice beaches.’

Royce cocked his head to hear her better. ‘What did you say?’

‘Maloney,’ the woman repeated. ‘Town not far from here. Along the coast.’

When the woman spoke the name of the town out loud, Royce noticed she dropped the vowels—a side effect of a slurred rural accent. Something started to needle at the back of his mind. He counted out his coins on the countertop, then headed for the door. ‘Thanks for the coffee.’

Main street was quieter now, the restaurants closing up for the night and the patrons disappearing into the warmly lit interiors of the pubs and bars. Royce jogged over to his VW parked behind the cinema. Sitting in the passenger seat, he flipped through the pages of his notebook until he found the Lynch interview, a name underlined heavily: *Melanie*. That night at the pub, when Rose had been off her face, she wasn’t talking about a friend. She was talking about the town. Just before your transfer, Royce thought. Maloney C.I.B. copped a murder-suicide. Could that be what she was talking about? Could Rose be wrapped up in a murder? Three weeks ago he wouldn’t have believed it. Now though, after what Tyzinski and Charlie had told him, he just couldn’t say.

Royce sat down next to his wife.

‘Long walk to the bathroom?’ she said.

‘Went outside. Needed to clear my head.’

‘Did it work?’

Royce searched for his tub of popcorn in the darkness. ‘For now.’

With one hand bracing himself against the wall, Farrow tugged the heavy duffel bag from out the closet. Inside were the last of his father's possessions—clothes, photo albums, the shotgun. His old man kept the weapon close at hand when he worked the canefields, ready to scare away mongrels that roamed the brake. Most of the time he would fire salt-buck instead of a live round. The projectiles were harmless over a long distance, and he didn't dare risk killing the animal in case it was a working dog gone astray.

Beneath the weapon Farrow found shells, some live mixed among the salt, and the brass on both had started to rust from the moisture in the house. He placed them on the mattress above before continuing his search through the bag. In the pocket of a torn work-shirt, he found what he was looking for—a lone key on a metallic ring, the only way to open his father's boxing gym.

XI

Royce called Eddie first thing the next morning.

Dawning light filled the kitchen and in his half-waking state, he felt like a bug trapped in amber. His mind had been racing all night, and it had left him tossing and turning into the small hours. On the drive back from Warwick yesterday, the same images had kept forming in his mind like a developing photograph—Rose and Mick in a naked embrace, blood pooling along the carpet of the hatchback. They dominated his thoughts, and he didn't even notice his mind wandering until he pulled up into the driveway at home, his body running the whole trip to the Well on autopilot.

He stifled a yawn as Eddie picked up. 'Hello?'

'Boss. Royce here,' he said, putting a false croak into his voice. 'Don't know if I'll be in today. Bit crook'

'Mate, you sound sick as a dog.'

Royce coughed down the line. 'Must've caught something. Might have to take a couple days off.'

'Take whatever you need,' he said. 'Worse comes to worse, I'll throw one of the other boys on overtime.'

‘Feel bad leaving you in the lurch.’

Eddie laughed. ‘No need to fret. We’ll survive without you.’

He depressed the hook with his finger, and then called the operator. She connected him to the Maloney station.

Royce made his way through the glass doors of the Maloney cop shop. The exterior had the brick and mortar look of an old apartment complex, but the inside lobby was air-conditioned, the floors made of polished tile.

A suited detective was waiting for him at the front desk. ‘You must be Royles,’ the detective said, his face so red it was like his necktie was choking the life from him. ‘Name’s Phillips.’

‘Royce actually.’

He checked his watch. ‘Well, we gonna stand here and muck about, or go and have this chat?’

Phillips led him past tradesman carrying tools and pallets of wood, and into an interview room at the back of the station. The carpet beneath the desk was faintly stained with blood. Royce knew for a fact most police stations kept a phonebook on hand for when a rotten witness or a perp was holding back during an interview. All it took was a few good whacks and even the hardest of men would be talking.

A power drill whined away somewhere nearby.

‘You guys doing the place over?’ Royce said.

A lone tuft of strawberry blonde hair stood separate on Phillip’s balding head, and every so often he would palm it flat again. ‘Place’ll be a pearler when she’s done. But I’m not

happy about losing my office. Who knew it would take a week to install a bloody kitchenette?’

Royce toed a loose strand of carpet. ‘You leaving this room for lucky last?’

Phillips smiled, canines pinching his lips. ‘Gotta look after the ones who come first, mate. Worry about the other bozos later.’

‘Well, anything would be an upgrade on Caleb’s Well.’

‘You just gotta know the right people. That’s how you get things done. Boss here has been friends with the Commissioner for a long time. Both of them are part of the old school, you know. Anyway, what can I do for you?’

Royce took out his notebook and pen. ‘I wanted to know a little about the shooting that occurred here. I think it happened about three months ago. As I understand it, a polly’s niece was involved.’

Phillips nodded. ‘Yeah, she was. Made the process a bloody nightmare. High profile case means a lot of meddling hands. Had fellas from all over the state coming in. Whole thing was open and shut though. Boyfriend shot the girl while she was sleeping. Then turned the pistol on himself.’

‘Motive?’ Royce asked.

‘Drugs we think. Both had track marks, and the records for it. Boyfriend was a scumbag from the moment he slithered out of his mother. Had a list of priors as long as the day is hot. Armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon. Did a stretch in WA before settling down here.’

‘What was she doing with a guy like that?’

Phillips shrugged. ‘Not a clue. You see it though. Good girls gone bad for some dickhead. All downhill once they start on the gear.’

Royce thought about Rose and Mick. Maybe that's what had started her on the dark path. Maybe they were both users. Royce tried to recall seeing track marks on Mick's arms, maybe hidden between his fingers. 'You sure it was a murder-suicide?'

'Like I said, open and close. Neighbour called in the shots. No witnesses, nothing.'

'What about foul play? Did you check for fingerprints?'

Phillips leant back in his chair. 'You got something to say, then say it mate.'

'No offence meant. I'm just trying to sort out the details in my head. Detective Sergeant Tyzinski in Armed Hold-Up said there might be a connection between your case and something we're working on at the Well.'

A note of recognition flickered across Phillip's face. 'I know Tzar. Good cop.'

'So you know I have to take his word then. If there's a possible connection, I would have to be thick not to check it out.'

Phillips brought his hands together on the peeling table top, almost as if begging for penance. 'So what is that you're after then?'

'I want to visit the crime scene,' Royce said.

Nicole and Bishop scrambled down the hillside, careful not to trip as they worked their way towards the rusted livestock fence. The reach of cleared land lay just beyond and it hung heavy like a stone mantel above the flatlands, a loose circle of rotting shacks in the middle.

Bishop leant down and spread the barbed wire fence for the girl, hoisting himself over the top once she was through. At the bottom of the incline, Nicole looked over her shoulder. She saw a jagged fissure in the stone and soil behind them—a path cut into the foothill itself. Nothing but shadow lay beyond the opening.

‘What’s down there?’ she asked.

‘Leads to one of the shafts,’ Bishop said. ‘My Mum told me they closed the place down after a fella died in there. Roof crumbled in on one of the mines and trapped him inside. Fella named Coffin. David Coffin.’

‘They get him out?’ Nicole asked.

‘Eventually. Was stone dead though by the time they finally reached him. Used to have bad dreams about it when I was a kid. Imagined myself waking up in there.’

Nicole looked into the dimness of the fissure. For a moment the wind picked up and it soughed through the gap like a dying breath.

‘If we weren’t careful coming down, we could have fallen in,’ she said. ‘We were walking right near it.’

Bishop nodded. ‘Dangerous out here. See why we couldn’t bring the dog?’

They wandered over to the miner’s shacks. A muddy pool lay between the sagging structures and a few mosquitoes buzzed low over the water’s surface. Nicole swatted at those

flying around her face and arms.

Bishop leant down at the water's edge, cooled his neck.

'How did you find this place?' Nicole asked.

'Came out here when I was a boy,' Bishop said.

'Why?'

'To be alone. Didn't really like the other kids around town.'

Nicole understood. This morning Mariah had dropped her off at school, and she had promised the woman she would stay until the end of day. But during class the older boys behind her started to whisper and laugh and throw notes. One of them said: *nice tits love*. She had left not long after, as soon as the first lunch bell rang.

'Got you something,' Bishop said. 'Close your eyes.'

'What is it?' Nicole asked.

'Not telling. Close them and find out.'

Nicole did as she was told, and Bishop placed something in her open palm. The outside felt soft and downy, but a rigid frame lay beneath. She opened her eyes to see a hare's foot, exposed bone capped with a spent shotgun cartridge.

'From the one we shot,' Bishop said. 'You like it?'

She fingered the bony toes. 'Don't get many presents.'

'If you don't like it, then just tell me.'

The girl shook her head. 'I love it. Thanks.'

'That's good,' he said. 'You wanna drink?'

She thought of the bottle hidden in the freezer of the stranger's house. 'I guess so.'

'Keep some water in that shack,' Bishop said. 'Here. You'll need this.'

Nicole took the padlock key. 'Oh. Okay.'

She unlocked the shack door and went inside. The canteen was atop an uneven stack

of cardboard boxes. One of them was open and she saw it was filled with brown packages, the outsides sealed with tape.

She returned to the pool to find Bishop standing shirtless before the water's edge, sweat dripping down his hairless chest. She passed him the canteen and he took a deep slug.

'Hot out,' the girl said.

Bishop waded out into the pool. 'Way too hot.'

'Where are you going?' she asked.

He dived head first into the water, sediment clouding around him. For nearly a minute, Bishop did not reappear. The rippling in his wake slowly calmed and Nicole felt her pulse rise in her neck. Suddenly, at the other end of the pool, Bishop erupted from the water, his wild hair pressed flat to the scalp.

'C'mon in,' he said. 'Nice and cool.'

Nicole crossed her arms. 'I don't have any togs.'

Bishop shrugged. 'Don't need them. Come in like that.'

He turned and dived down into the water once again. The pink soles of his feet flashed for a moment before disappearing into the murky swill.

Nicole took off her jeans and shoes, then pulled the hem of her long-sleeved shirt low as she laboured out into the cool water. The cuts on her arms stung as they prickled with goosebumps. Although she had never been a strong swimmer, her mother used to take her to the Maloney ocean pool during the school holidays. And they would spend their day chasing each other up and down the open lanes, until they were both so exhausted they fell asleep on the surrounding sand.

Wading out further into the water, Nicole felt the silty bottom fall away under her feet. She slipped under the surface and began to kick wildly. But a sudden chill sapped the power from her limbs. Bishop's arms wrapped around her in the darkness, and the man hauled her

back up into the air.

‘Careful,’ he said. ‘Much deeper than you think.’

She spat out a mouthful of water. ‘Why’s it so cold here?’

‘That’ll be one of the old shafts,’ Bishop said. ‘Runs at an angle into the foothill. Must be right above it.’

Nicole looked at the dark water around her. The thought of all that space stretching down into the earth left her head spinning. ‘How deep does it go?’

‘When I was a kid,’ Bishop said, ‘I would wait for it to storm, so the shaft would flood like now. I’d dive down and try to reach the bottom. But it’s pitch black in there, and I was scared of getting turned around. You can’t see anything with all the dirt.’

Nicole let her head slip under the water. Again she struggled to see beyond the gloom. But the rising coolness of the shaft wrapped around her and for a moment she almost felt weightless.

She swam back to the surface to appease her burning lungs.

Bishop was treading water. ‘You all right?’

The girl struggled for breath. ‘Yeah, wanted to see the mine.’

‘Well. Did you?’

Nicole’s nose was running wildly, snot snaking down onto her lips. ‘It was dark down there. Almost like—’ She struggled for the word.

Bishop looked at her. His eyes were the same dark brown as the water around them.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ she said. ‘It’s stupid, anyway.’

He smiled. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

‘Course I can,’ she said.

Bishop ran his fingers across the water. ‘I don’t know if I should show you.’

‘You don’t trust me? Maybe I should just leave then.’

‘You think you could get away?’ Bishop said.

He dropped beneath the waterline. Nicole watched him approach, his shape uncertain beneath the ripples, and he grabbed her around the waist. Holding her tightly in his arms, he hefted her out of the water and started to squeeze. She felt the naked skin of his chest against her legs. ‘You wanna go?’ he asked. ‘I’ll help then.’

She began to laugh. ‘No, no, no.’

He threw her backwards into the deepest part of the pool and her squeals echoed across the reach.

‘You want more?’ Bishop dived for her again.

Nicole was cackling now, almost manically.

Driving into work for his morning shift, Farrow found Mill Road empty. The only remnants of the striking millers were a few lingering beer cans in the roadside grass.

He pulled up outside and searched for movement in the mill, but all he could see were a pair of overalls draped over the safety railing, material swelling in the hot wind. It was no surprise they had given up the blockade, even after all these weeks. There was no point sabotaging an empty mill.

The radio croaked away in the dash.

...Sturgess argues that the results of his inquiry are clear. There is a rampant sex trade in Brisbane, and it includes homosexual prostitutes, pornography, and even organised paedophilia. The local police are accused of casting a blind eye to organised brothels, and, in some cases, even working side-by-side with them to increase conviction rates. To address the Queen's Councilman's devastating allegations, we have the Deputy Commissioner on the line...

Farrow tried the door to the demountable office and found it unlocked. Keeping the lights off and the blinds shut, he sat down behind Wayne's desk, and flicked through the stacks of paperwork. At the bottom was a series of old shipping manifests, *QBI* written across the top. Farrow took one, folded it in half, and slid it into his shirt pocket.

His father watched him from the photograph on the wall, face leathered by years of fieldwork, eyes like ball bearings in the sockets.

Two figures emerged from beyond the trees, their hazy silhouettes slowly taking form as they moved down the bitumen. They were each dressed in torn singlets and shorts, and as they approached a house that belonged to neither of them, the tallest removed a knife.

Carefully they opened the side gate and made their way into the backyard. Hot wind wheezed over the rooftops. The thick wires drooping between the electrical poles began to shake. From the rear of the house, an animal cried out in pain and the sound was sharp, violent. A group of galahs erupted from the branches of a gum in the front yard and flew skywards, skeletal branch tips shaking in the wake of their flight.

The two men left through the open fence, and headed back out to the road. The tallest wiped his hands on a rag from his pocket, but the dark stains remained.

Phillips gave Royce a razor-thin case file, a set of house keys, and some rough directions to the crime scene. Before leaving, Royce asked the detective if he wanted to accompany him. ‘You trust me with all this?’ Royce said.

Phillips scratched at the flaky scalp beneath his island of hair. ‘Nothing to muck up. Place was cleaned out pretty much straight after we closed the case. From what I understand, owner wants to start renting again as soon as possible. Besides, like I said, open and shut.’

Chugging along the coastline in his VW, Royce tried to make sense of the town’s twisting layout. After a few turnarounds and dead-ends, he made it to the weatherboard house in one piece. The front gate hung loose on the hinges and the yard was overgrown with wild grass and bindi weeds. Besides another house down the street it was the only domestic residence on the block, everything else shrimp pools for the Maloney farms. Fountains stirred the black-bottomed tubs and the sound coming through the open windows of the VW was like static.

Royce opened the file across his lap. He flicked through the photographs one-by-one, trying to trace the order of events. The first showed a woman lying face down on a bed, three gunshots to her back. The body was splayed diagonally and her feet were facing the doorway. The second was of her boyfriend. According to the file, he had pulled the trigger on himself in the lounge room. The photo showed him slouched on a reclining chair, pistol dangling loose from his trigger finger. His face was pallid and lifeless. Royce couldn’t tell if it was from the junk running through his veins at the time, or the bullet in his forehead.

Using the keys Phillips had given him, Royce let himself inside the house. The smell of bleach and disinfectant was overwhelming, and he was forced to open the windows as he moved from room to room. Like the detective had said, the place was mostly cleaned out—a bow-legged kitchen table the only remaining furniture inside. The shooting only happened a month ago now, Royce thought. So how fast did they clear the scene?

He made his way outside into the backyard, following the cement path down towards a sunken tool shed. The door was clamped shut with a padlock, and Royce fingered through the keys until he found a perfect fit. The door squealed open to reveal an empty tin interior. Falling dust had left square outlines on the cement foundation. Royce checked the file again. The shed was listed as empty upon entry.

Before heading back to his VW, he searched the bin out by the road. It had been emptied since the clean out, but a piece of sodden paper was plastered to the bottom corner. Royce could see it was a document of some kind, printed type bleeding into the page. He leant the bin over and scraped the page out. It was one part of a shipping manifest. The main body was mostly illegible, but the heading was still clear: *QBI Importers LTD CW003*. What were a couple of junkies doing with something like this? Back inside his vehicle, Royce put the manifest into an evidence bag, then closed it away inside the VW glovebox.

As he sat back up, movement down the street caught his eye. A woman's face appeared briefly in the window of the other house. She was staring out at the road, her features weighed down by a thick coil of white hair. Royce remembered what Phillips had told him—a neighbour called in the shots.

The woman took her time to answer his knock, and at first Royce thought she was ignoring him. But when she finally peered out from behind the door, he saw the reason for her delay. Although she was probably no older than fifty, a breathing mask was slung low around her neck, the tube running down her side and into a portable oxygen canister on wheels.

‘Thought as much,’ she said.

‘What gave me away?’ Royce asked.

She traced him up and down with a shaking finger. ‘Uniform. You coppers are always a curious lot. Come on in then.’

The front lounge was clearly the heart of the house. A futon bed was placed in front of the television set and an empty bedpan lay nearby. The whole place was stewed with the sour smell of piss and decay, and it was all too familiar for Royce. Just like your mother, he thought. In those last few months.

‘Ignore the mess,’ the woman said as she wheezed back towards the futon. ‘I do. Nurse is suppose to be coming around today, but she’s always late.’

Royce stayed by the open door, a cross breeze bringing in fresh air from outside. ‘I just wanted to follow up on your call from late September. About the incident that occurred down the street.’

She squinted at him. ‘Already spoke to someone about that. Day after.’

‘I understand,’ Royce said. ‘But I just wanted to sort a few details out.’

The woman took a cigarette packet from the top pocket of her bathrobe. She lit one up. ‘What do you want to know?’

‘Well,’ Royce said. ‘The file notes are a bit vague. I was hoping you could tell me what happened again.’

The woman sighed, the sound rattling with spit. ‘Can’t go out much these days, what with the tank and all. So I spend a lot of time watching telly at home. Quiet street for the most

part. You notice when things aren't quite right. Night it happened I heard someone pull up down the street. People were always coming and going from that house, but not often after midnight. So I made my way over to the window and saw a couple of guys getting out of a car. They were dressed all in black. Their shoes, pants, shirts. Couldn't tell from here, but it looked like they were wearing something over their faces, like a mask, or bandanna. I watched them as they went inside the house. Heard some loud bangs a moment later.'

'Do you remember how many men exactly?'

'Two. At least I think so. It was pretty dark that night.'

'And you're sure they were both men?'

She considered it. 'Pretty sure.'

'You see them carrying anything? Maybe a bag? Or a case?'

The woman began to cough. She signalled Royce for the bedpan on the floor and he passed it to her. She spat something into the metallic basin. 'Not that I could see. Coming out they had something though. They was carrying it between the two of them. Went back inside for even more. I tried to get the make of the car or the licence plate, but there's no real streetlights out here.'

Royce thought back to his meeting at the Maloney station. Phillips hadn't mentioned a vehicle that night, or the men. And neither did the report. But if the woman was telling the truth then the scenario was clear. Junkies were notorious for leaving the front door unlocked, especially when on the nod. The men in black may have let themselves inside, and then taken the boyfriend from point blank. Toxicology reported a heavy dose of heroin in his bloodstream, so there was a good chance he didn't even notice them approaching.

If the gunshot startled the girl from the kitchen, or maybe the bathroom, then she might have done a runner towards the rear. Royce imagined the shooter panicking and following her down the hallway. If he took the three shots from the bedroom door, then it

might've flung her body across the bed, limbs splayed at odd angles. Just like the crime scene photograph.

'You tell the questioning officer all of this?' Royce asked.

The woman nodded. 'Every word.'

'You remember the officer's name?'

She sucked on her cigarette. 'Kinda remember him. My medication isn't so good with my head. Forgetting things all the time. Wasn't a detective, I know that much. He wore a uniform same as yours. Similar age too. I remember he had a funny way about him, like my old man. Moved just like a country boy. I asked him if he was from around here, and he said he wasn't. Said he was part of some exchange they had going on.'

Back at the Maloney station, Royce found Phillips in the C.I.B. office. He was sitting with his feet up on a desk, soggy meat pie halfway to his mouth. A thick dollop of gravy stained his tie and Royce was certain that, given time, even more would soon join the mess.

Phillips wiped his face with a hand. 'No need to see me again, Constable. Fine for you to leave everything with reception.'

'When I saw you this morning, you said the case involved a lot of out-of-towners. You keep a sign-in record? Maybe something documenting special duties?'

Phillips sighed and dropped his lunch onto the butcher's paper. He sorted through the files stacked behind him until he found a manila folder.

'I'm looking for a particular name,' Royce said. 'Cop who questioned the neighbour. She's not sure, but she said they could've been from another station.'

Phillips opened the file and ran his finger down the page. 'Lot of people that week. Vaguely recall the fella you're talking about. Young buck travelling with the big boys from Central. Rarely left their side. Pretty eager to get his feet wet from what I can remember.'

'Whoever he is,' Royce said. 'I think he may have missed something.'

Phillips paused his search, a look of confusion blooming on his face. 'Well, fuck me.'

'What?' Royce asked. 'Something missing?'

Phillips spun the document around on the desktop and pointed to a name. Royce scanned down the page until he saw it. Written in unfamiliar handwriting was his own name and rank: *Constable James Royce*.

The hours seemingly lengthened in the growing heat.

Nicole lay beside Bishop on the banks of the watering hole, drifting in and out of sleep, and the sun was high in the north-western sky when they finally stirred.

Bishop drank from the canteen. 'It's later than I thought.'

'Should probably get back home soon.'

'Not yet,' he said. 'I still have to show you my secret.'

They entered the shadowy fissure rending the hillside. The width of the passage was thin and they struggled to move through it side-by-side, their feet kicking up loose stones. Nicole wiped her forehead to keep the sweat from her eyes, and she smelt the mossy perfume of the watering hole lingering on her skin. She wondered how long she could wait before she was forced to take a shower again.

The passage slowly curved away from the entrance. Jagged walls opened up into a forked trail. 'Want to go left,' Bishop said. 'Right will only take you back to town.'

They moved forward along the waning path. Nicole felt something hard beneath her feet, hidden in the shingled soil, and she kicked at it with the toe of her sandshoe. It was a metal railing—one part of a larger track that ran parallel with the open fissure. She stepped over it and her toe caught on the lip, causing her to lose balance. Chunks of rock crumbled into her palm as she put up her hands to stop her fall.

Bishop grabbed her wrist. He looked up at the featureless sky through the opening. 'Careful. You don't want nothing sliding down from up top. No one would ever find you.'

He ushered her forward, deeper into the passage, until they arrived at a dead-end. A

rusted tin sheet covered the impasse wall.

Bishop grabbed the tin sheeting. 'Careful of your head.'

With a grunt, he heaved it aside to reveal a tunnel cut into the foothill, the interior even darker than the shadows of the fissure. Beams of wood provided a supporting frame for the entrance and they extended into the black.

'Go on. I'll be close behind,' Bishop said.

With her hands held out in front of her, Nicole felt her way along the rough walls of the mineshaft. The air within was cool and still, but Nicole smelt something sweet, and it only grew as she shuffled forward. She thought of the earth towering above her. How the only thing protecting them was the handiwork of men long dead.

Bishop noisily rifled for something at the entrance. Nicole glanced over her shoulder to see his silhouette, body stooped low to fit the shallow shaft. A beam of light suddenly seared her eyes.

'Sorry,' he said, lowering the battery powered lamp.

'I don't know if I can do this,' she said.

Bishop touched her arm. 'I would never let anything hurt you.'

They travelled further into the bowels of the foothill, the shaft slowly widening into a larger cavern. Bishop stood up straight to stretch his back. His heavy breath echoed against the stony walls and the lamp struggled to breach their distance.

'C'mon,' Bishop said. 'Just a little further.'

With his arm around her shoulders, he led Nicole towards the rear of the cavern, the light revealing a dip in the floor.

The smell here was overwhelming, and Nicole was forced to cover her nose with a trembling hand. She could see a familiar shape at her feet—another girl, not much older than herself. The body's stillness was too much for her and Nicole had to look away. 'Who is she?'

she asked.

‘They told me to keep people away,’ Bishop said. ‘I knew about the shacks, but they never told me about this.’

‘You have to tell someone,’ Nicole said.

‘You can’t tell anybody about this. The men will know and they won’t be happy. You said you would keep my secret. You promised. Remember?’

A distant dripping resonated along the stony walls. Bishop shifted his weight and the lamp cast distorted shapes across the rocky wall, their frail silhouettes almost like a shadow play. Nicole thought of the hole in the girl’s head, then of bones beneath sinew, of muscle beneath flesh.

Farrow noticed the side gate hanging open as he pulled into the driveway, wind swatting the wire-mesh against the house. He whistled through his teeth. But the dog was nowhere to be seen.

Closing the gate, he stood in a tacky clump of soil. The sight of it left his throat tight. He found even more in the rear yard, and it clotted the sun-browned grass in patches, almost like a trail leading him to the umbrella tree. Farrow found him cradled in the roots, viscera draped along the knots and bulbs.

Above the mess a rope dangled from the gnarled bough, swaying slowly in the breeze. It was the remnants of a tyre swing Farrow had built for Nicole years ago. The rope had slowly grown rotten with rain and wind, and eventually snapped. But by the time he had noticed, the girl had already moved on from such childish pursuits.

Farrow crouched down and took the animal's cold snout into his hand. He would have to get the shovel out of the shed, and bury the dog before she got home.

XII

Early the next morning, Royce searched the phonebook for QBI Holdings LTD, the waterlogged shipping manifest on the table top beside him. He tried the listed number, and it rang out after transferring him to another line. Still early, he thought. Maybe no one was on the clock.

Across the table Shaun was digging at a bowl of gluggy oats, most of them slopping over the sides. ‘Da-dah,’ he said. ‘Look. Mess.’

Royce flipped through his notebook for Tyzinski’s number. ‘Yeah, buddy. I see.’

A tired voice picked up on the second ring. ‘Hello?’

‘Looking for Tyzinski,’ Royce said. ‘He in?’

The cop on the other end of the line sighed. ‘Gissus a sec. Who should I say is calling?’

Royce gave the man his rank and name. He heard him drop the phone hard against the desktop, the crack breaking the background din of telephone bells, typewriters, voices. Shaun continued to rattle his bowl from side to side across the table, and watery milk spilt out over the sides. Royce grabbed a paper towel and started to clean up the mess.

A familiar voice crackled down the line. ‘Royce, mate. How you been?’

‘The other day,’ Royce said to Tyzinski, ‘after we spoke in your car, I started to look into things a little more. I think you were right. There’s something else to our missing girl. Something bigger.’

Tyzinski paused. ‘You sound a little ruffled. Things all right?’

Royce thought about the Maloney station register, his name written across the page. Deep down inside he knew it had to be tied to Brisbane, and what he did there. Maybe someone was setting him up for payback. Or maybe it was a warning. ‘I’m fine. But I need to know if there’s any word about me at Central. Good or bad.’

‘Haven’t heard a thing,’ he said. ‘But I’ll keep an ear to the ground. If anything comes up, I’ll let you know.’

‘Appreciate it,’ Royce said. ‘Can I ask you one more favour? There’s a company out Brisbane way called QBI Holdings. You reckon you could look into them for me? Maybe see how reputable they are?’

‘This still about your girl?’

‘I hope so,’ he said.

After hanging up the phone, Royce headed to the bedroom and dressed himself in jeans and a plain t-shirt. The neighbour in Maloney had noted at least two men leaving the truck that night, but only one name kept resurfacing—Mick, and he had seemingly gone to ground. If Royce wanted to figure out what was truly going on here in the Well, he would have to find the second man.

Down the hall the phone began to ring. Royce headed towards the kitchen, but Anna reached the receiver first.

‘Hello?’ she said. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘Who is it?’ Royce asked.

She shook her head. ‘There’s no one there.’

He took the receiver from her hand. The line hummed with static, a brief murmur breaking the silence. ‘Thin fucking ice, Jimmy. Watch yourself.’

The line went dead.

Royce checked the station for life and found the kettle warm, but the LandCruiser missing from the front drive. He went to Eddie’s office and began to search through the older incident reports, crosschecking them with an address in his notebook.

He found a match in the second drawer—two instances of assault, a drunk and disorderly. The guy was violent, but he had been mostly quiet for over a decade now. At the back of the file he found a hand written note. Royce recognised the butcher’s scrawl as Eddie’s.

25/01/84, approx. 01:45: Reports of a man and woman shouting. Call-in anonymous male. Door was answered by homeowner; history of violent offences. Wife appeared on request—said everything was fine. No visible signs of harm. Warned them about the noise and both seemed apologetic. Left approx. 02:00.

Royce returned the note to the file. As he stood up to leave, he heard the back door of the station slam, footsteps approaching.

‘Jesus,’ Walker said. He held the tank keys in hand. ‘Scared the shit out of me. What are you doing in? Eddie said you were sick.’

Royce placed the file under his arm. ‘Working from home. Just needed to pick something up.’

‘McIntyre was looking for you earlier this morning,’ Walker said. ‘Seemed pretty eager to find you.’

‘He in today?’ Royce asked.

Walker shook his head. ‘Swapped with me for the night shift. Said he had to go visit the missus or something. I reckon he’s just bludging to be honest. You want me to tell him you dropped by?’

Royce thought about the wall of photographs in McIntyre’s house, the faces immobile in the gauzy dim. ‘It’s fine,’ Royce said. ‘I’m sure I’ll run into him.’

Sitting on the frame of her open window, Nicole watched the yard, her bare feet dangling above the unkempt grass. She knocked a spoon against the dog's bowl.

'Here Boo,' she said.

And although a dog began to bark and whine in a nearby yard, Nicole knew in her gut it wasn't him.

Mariah blew into her mug before sipping. ‘How’s she doing?’

‘Dunno,’ Farrow said. ‘Hasn’t spoken to me since last night.’

‘What happened?’ she asked.

With his back to the kitchen table, Farrow poured a shot of whisky into his coffee, mixed the steaming liquid with a calloused finger. ‘Came home and the dog was gone.

Someone had opened the side gate.’

‘You reckon he ran away?’

Farrow sat down beside her. ‘Maybe.’

Down the other end of the house a door opened. Both he and Mariah listened as Nicole moved across the linoleum. The toilet flushed a moment later and then, almost without pause, the door closed again.

‘Do you want me to talk to her?’ Mariah said.

Farrow shook his head. ‘She’ll be fine. Know where she is at least.’

‘What about you, though? You doing okay?’

He scratched the uneven stubble growing along his jawline. ‘I’ll cope.’

Mariah moved closer to him. ‘Will, people are talking. I heard about Pete’s place the other day.’

‘It’s fine,’ he said. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘You got Nicole to think about.’

Farrow made his way over to the rear flyscreen. He drank deeply from his coffee as he stared outside. Pain flared briefly in his right elbow—arthritis from his fighting days. Despite

being left-handed by nature, Farrow had always trained heavy on his opposite arm. The south-paw stance was confusing enough to most right-handed opponents, but it was only made worse when it was coupled with a strong opposite jab. Often during a bout, Farrow would feign with his dominant arm, only to come around with a powerful and unexpected hook. The approach was sly. He knew that. But the tactic had won him more fights than he could remember. Besides, his father had always said the same thing: ‘Doesn’t matter what you have to do. Just win. All you’ll ever get is a thrashing if you don’t stand a chance.’

Farrow turned from the door to find Mariah standing close behind. She looked up at him, her eyes meeting his, and began to caress his swollen knuckles. ‘I just want you to be careful, okay.’

Although their time together was decades ago now, Farrow still recalled the smell of her sweat, the tang she left on his lips. ‘Mariah,’ he said.

She dropped her eyes and Farrow followed. The tarnished gold of his wedding band stood clear against his tanned skin.

‘I should go,’ she said, voice shaking.

Farrow shook his head. ‘You don’t have to. The girl will be up soon.’

Mariah took her handbag from the table ‘I’ll call you,’ she said before leaving. ‘Just remember. Nicole...’

She left him standing there, alone in the kitchen.

Farrow switched on the kettle and made himself another coffee, this time doubling the scotch. As he was putting away the bottle in the shelf above the sink, someone knocked at the front door. He opened it expecting to see Mariah standing there again, waiting for him. But instead there was a man—the young copper he had seen talking with Evans.

The house was like most of those in the Well, a glum brick and mortar affair falling apart at the soffits, front verandah succumbing to rot. Royce knocked on the front door and a man answered a moment later. He flashed his ID. ‘William Farrow?’

‘What’s this about?’ the man said.

‘Mick Hastings. I wanted to ask you a few questions about him. And maybe a few about the big guy he travels with. Rough looking bloke for the most part. Got a beard, shaved head, some tattoos.’

Farrow opened the door wider. ‘Talk about it inside.’

Dust erupted from the couch as Royce sat down in the lounge room. The notes tickled his nostrils and he sneezed.

Farrow loomed above him. ‘I work with Mick at the mill. His uncle runs the place, and the big guy is his right hand man. Harry’s his name. That’s all I’ve got to say, and that’s all I know.’

Straight to the point. Royce should’ve guessed it with a face like Farrow’s. ‘You friends with them at all?’ Royce asked. ‘Maybe have a beer at the pub now and then? Watch the footy together?’

‘No.’

‘Then why was this Harry fella outside your house the other day? Seemed pretty interested in what was happening here.’

Farrow was silent.

‘You ever been to Maloney?’ Royce asked.

The man opened the front door. ‘I told you what I know. Now if you don’t mind, I got stuff to do.’

Royce watched him closely, looking for nervous tics, or averted eyes—the telltale signs of stress. But nothing cracked the man’s exterior. Royce stood up from the couch. ‘Thanks for your time Mr. Farrow. I just have one last question before I go. You ever hear of a company called QBI?’

The man’s eyes pulled into narrow slits. ‘The holdings company?’ he asked.

Royce sat down at the kitchen table. He listened as the man told him everything he knew. Despite all the prodding he and Eddie had been doing around town, most of the details were fresh to him—the tension between Wayne and a man called Anders, the striking millers pulling scare tactics on the pikers. Royce remembered the call-out he received the other day. Smashed windows were starting to make a little more sense.

‘So QBI is interested in purchasing the mill,’ Royce asked. ‘Why though? Not exactly prime real estate.’

Farrow rested his fists on the kitchen table. ‘No idea. But I think Wayne has known about it for a while now. He kept pushing the strike so the new owners would sell. Maybe QBI was giving him a cut.’

‘But why not purchase the mill when it was first for sale?’

‘Maybe the money wasn’t there,’ Farrow said. ‘Maybe they had to wait for something else to come through.’

‘What about the new owners? They change much?’

‘Nothing on a floor level,’ Farrow said. ‘Deliveries were gonna change though. Anders said he was going to use company trucks to deliver goods. Would save money in the long run.’

Royce thought about the manifest he found in Maloney. What if the murder house was just one stop along a line? Maybe someone was using the mill’s delivery system for distribution. A way to offload stolen goods. ‘Where do the trucks normally go after they leave the Well?’

‘Depends,’ Farrow said. ‘Most of them head to the harbor in Brisbane, some even—’ He chewed the inside of his mouth.

‘What?’ Royce asked.

‘I tried their number the other day. The call redirected me to a union office for the Painters and Dockers.’

The feeling was like a gut punch. Everything was leading back to Tyzinski’s case. ‘The number for QBI?’ Royce asked. ‘You sure?’

Farrow nodded. He cracked his knuckles one by one, the action unconscious, almost involuntary.

‘Don’t take this the wrong way,’ Royce said. ‘But you don’t seem like the type of man to help me out of the goodness of your heart. So why drop the hard-man act?’

Farrow stood up from the table. He finished his coffee in one swig, and then made his way over to the sink. ‘I’m wrapped up in all of this now, even if I don’t want to be. I made the choice and I have to live with it. But I need you to tell me how bad it is.’

Royce thought about everything that had happened over the last couple of days—the murder house, the connection between the mill and the heists. There was something bigger at play here, and it had more than enough weight to cover up a police investigation.

‘Bad enough,’ Royce said.

He took the thin arterial road back towards town. Cane sprouts struggled from the covered furrows running either side of the hot bitumen, and the budding greenery was like outstretched hands reaching for sunlight.

Royce's thoughts were galloping after his impromptu meeting with Farrow. The man had cinched the scope of what was truly happening here in the Well—the mill, the heists, the case in Maloney, Rose's disappearance. But that didn't solve anything. Royce had to find a crack now, an opportunity for him to needle his way inside and tear everything up. All this because a pervert legged it at the sight of you, and he wasn't even involved.

Something beneath the VW's bonnet began to rattle in the heat, the sound almost a gallop. Royce switched on the radio to cover the noise and a familiar song began to crawl from the speakers. Maybe The Saints, or at least another Brisbane band like them. On more than one occasion, Royce had picked up rough-looking punks for drinking in public, and they quoted the song on the drive back to lock up: *I see police but where's the crime? We're just like convicts doing time.*

Further up the road Royce could see the outline of a car slowly solidify in the shimmering heat. The vehicle was parked next to the firebreak, and the driver's side door hung open above the sudden drop. Royce couldn't help but think of Rose's hatchback hidden in the darkness.

He pulled up on the bitumen. 'Hello? Anyone there?'

The plants around here were tall and flowering, their thick stalks keeling in the wind. Royce stepped outside and approached the empty vehicle. He slipped on the loose soil of the firebreak as he edged around the bonnet, towards the open door, and he gripped the aerial to

stop himself tumbling down. Clumped dirt skittered beneath his feet as he scrambled back upright.

Something large moved in the brake below him. He turned to see three men emerging from the cane. Each was wearing a bandanna across their face and they were dressed in overalls and work boots. Royce instinctively reached for his weapon, but it was at home with his uniform. The men stood silent in the dip of the firebreak. The radio in the VW was still running and Royce heard the tinny guitar slowly growing louder now, more frantic.

‘C’mon then,’ Royce said.

The man in the middle broke the line. He scrambled up the sloping earth and Royce kicked him in the face. As the attacker tumbled back down, the other two started up towards him. Royce clocked one in the ear, but the second got a solid punch into his exposed ribs. Air escaped his lungs in a throat-tearing lurch. Both of them quickly grabbed his arms, turned him, and slammed him face first against the bonnet of the car. A fist hit the back of his head. His knees gave out and he dropped to the gravel.

‘You won’t learn, will you?’ a male said, his voice strained. ‘From now on you’re nothing but a small town copper.’ The speaker hocked something from the back of his throat, and he spat it onto Royce’s exposed neck and arms. Royce saw the sputum was stringy with blood. ‘You steer clear of anything worth shit.’

He laughed, body flaring in pain. ‘Got a hit in at least.’

The men didn’t find it funny. They started laying into him from every angle, their movement a flurry of fists and feet. All he could do was curl up and take the brunt. One of them grabbed the back of his hair and pushed his face against the ground, grinding his cheek into the gravel. ‘You fuck with us again. Or tell anyone what you’ve been up to. I’ll kill your kid, and then I’ll kill your wife and the baby she’s got up her cunt.’

A fist clocked Royce in the jaw. Then there was nothing but darkness.

Eddie eased himself down onto the station steps. He balanced his coffee on a knee and waited for the milky mix to cool, steam rising in the afternoon light. He preferred to drink his brew black, but he couldn't risk it with the condition of his stomach these days. Stress from the job had left him riddled with ulcers, and he had already given up the cigarettes and booze years ago, mostly at his doctor's behest. But the coffee was just too much to ask.

McIntyre's Falcon pulled up into the driveway. He strode up towards the station with his uniform draped over his arm. 'Sorry, boss. Lost track of time. Just get changed.'

Eddie lifted his coffee. 'No stress. Not in a rush, anyhow.'

Sour sweat filled the Sergeant's nostrils as McIntyre passed him on the stairs. In too much of a rush to even shower, Eddie thought.

Over the last couple of months the boy had been dragging at work, sometimes not even showing up at all. Eddie knew he was out visiting his daughter, wherever she was these days. But that wasn't an excuse. McIntyre hadn't said a word about his wife moving out, but the signs were obvious—unaccounted hours, unironed uniforms, and a near permanent twelve o'clock shadow. Eddie knew it was only time until he was forced to say something to him about it. Get him to open up.

It was the same with protocol. Eddie wasn't thick. He knew that McIntyre and Walker crossed the line sometimes, maybe taking a few dollars here and there to cast a blind eye. Normally that wasn't too much of a problem in a town like the Well. But things were starting to change. There were rumblings in Brisbane again, and they weren't looking good for the boys in blue.

McIntyre called out from inside. 'You hear from Royce today?'

'Still sick,' Eddie said.

'Fine with me. Means more overtime.' Eddie heard him moving through the station, from one room to another, his boots slamming the floorboards. 'Besides, kid is too eager. Should probably force him to take a few extra days. Don't want him spreading that shit around here.'

Eddie's coffee was cooler now, drinkable. He stood up and stretched his back. 'Maybe I'll give him a call. See how he's feeling.'

McIntyre appeared in the doorway above him, dressed in his uniform. 'Leave it,' he said. 'Boy needs his rest.'

Eddie checked his watch. 'Yeah. You're probably right. Clock out time for me, anyway. Guess you're the boss now.'

McIntyre nodded. 'Guess I am.'

Farrow parked his ute outside the old gym. He unlocked the back tray and dragged out the boxing bag, hefting it onto one shoulder with a grunt. Dusk was barely lit by a butcher's moon, and he struggled through the bracken towards the chained door, ground beneath his feet featureless in the low light. Still balancing the bag on his shoulder, he unlocked the door with his father's key.

Dust sat heavy on every surface, but still the gym held the familiar tang of sweat and oil. The four-legged frame his father had built stood in the centre of the room, and Farrow hoisted the bag onto a hook hanging from the crossbeams. The meeting this afternoon with the copper kept playing over and over in his mind—there was no reason for this Royce bloke to lie, and that honestly scared Farrow.

The sky outside was growing darker as evening fell, and it was nearly pitch black now in the windowless shed. Farrow headed back to the ute to grab his work lamp. He set it up in the corner of the gym, the cased bulb sitting independent from the battery, connected only by a mesh cable. When he flicked the switch, shadows suddenly sprung up against the walls.

One time he had tried to bring the girl here. He wanted to teach her how to fight like his father before him, to counter the bruises and scrapes she came home from school with. But she never took to it. Farrow thought about her sitting at home. Before leaving this afternoon he had asked Norm to keep an eye on the place while he was gone. The man had agreed, but he wouldn't even look up from his beer.

He wrapped his hands and wrists, then stood in front of the bag. With his right hand locked behind his left, Farrow began to spar. The muscles in his back tensed and then

released like a piston driving his fists into the canvas. Soon his chest was burning with every ragged breath. His bones were shuddering with every blow.

When he was still alive, Farrow's father had taught him three things—how to fight, how to shoot, and how to hate him. Right now, he could only do the first.

XIII

After a sleepless night on the couch, Royce got up and headed to the bathroom, bracing himself against the wall to keep upright. Pissing was painful. There was blood amid the stream and it reeked of ammonia. The kidney shots did even more damage than you thought.

After flushing, he stripped down, and pulled himself into the shower. Gingerly he washed himself under the hot water, stretching the stiff muscles. There were bruises along his ribs and back, the swollen flesh purple, painful to the touch. Yesterday, after he had mustered enough strength to stand, Royce stumbled back to the running VW. The people who had jumped him were long gone by then, and so was the car by the firebreak.

As he stepped back out onto the bathroom tiles, the phone rang.

‘Royce, mate. Tyzinski here. You okay? Sound like shit.’

‘Long night,’ Royce said, tightening the towel around his waist. ‘What can I do for you, Detective?’

‘Ran that name you gave me. QBI seems pretty legit for the most part. Been a registered company for a few years now, but recently they moved into the property game. Got land both up north and out west. Own a lot out your way too.’

‘Whereabouts?’ Royce asked.

He heard a rustling of paper down the line. ‘Seems they own a bar or two in Warwick, a house in Maloney, and quite a bit in the Well actually. Few shopfronts, a pub, things like that.’

Royce kneaded his aching ribs. ‘Thanks. Big help.’

He hung up the phone, dressed himself, and then headed to the spare room. The lockbox was in its usual hiding space among his books, and Royce opened it with a key from his pocket. Inside was his revolver. He released the loaded cylinder and thumbed the rim of the rounds. It was a habit he had developed on the academy shooting range, hard to break even after all these years.

The door eased open behind him and Royce hid the weapon from sight.

‘Bad shift?’ Anna said.

Royce kept his back to her. Before coming home last night, he had called from a payphone to tell her he was working late. She wasn’t impressed, but he had no choice. The headache of lying was worth hiding the worst of the damage from her. Afterwards he had driven back to Farrow’s place so as to warn him about what had happened, and to tell him to be on his guard. But no one answered the front door.

‘Domestic gone bad,’ Royce said. ‘Eddie gave me the brunt of the paperwork. Too wired to sleep when I got home, so I thought I might start unpacking.’

‘Everything end up okay?’ she asked. ‘With the domestic?’

Royce couldn’t understand why Anna was so calm. Maybe she was trying her hardest for him, for their family. But that only made the lies worse. Royce wanted to explain what was happening to him, and why he was doing what he was doing, but she would never understand. Remember what your mother said before she died, Royce thought. She told you not to become your father. But you know there’s something hidden in the both of you, passed

down from generation to generation—a flaw, an imperfection. Royce only hoped his own son wasn't hobbled by the same thing.

‘Just tired,’ Royce said.

‘I’ll make you a coffee. Just give me a minute.’

Royce listened as her footsteps faded down the hallway.

The throbbing in his ribs was growing worse as the day wore on, and it left him lightheaded. As he sat down on the floor, his foot brushed a stack of nearby books. They toppled over across the wood in an arcing line. Among them Royce saw one of his father’s many diaries, the leather cover beginning to crumble and peel. When he was working as a detective in Brisbane, Vic had been fastidious about recording his every day at work, almost as if he was keeping a record for the commissioner himself. And after retiring he would often sit at home and sort through the notes, spending hours at a time on a single book.

Although he never spoke about it, Royce knew his father was searching for answers within the pages, trying to piece together what happened to him on the job. Eventually he snapped and tried to burn them all. But Royce had salvaged what he could from the fireplace, and hid them. He was thinking that maybe one day his father would want to read through them again, if only to relive those days before his mother’s death.

His father was lucky he could even read at all after his accident. Often with gunshot injuries that high, the force would whiplash the victim and leave them with head trauma. Sometimes blood loss even caused permanent brain damage. Royce could remember that first night after the emergency surgery, waiting by his father’s hospital bed as a child, fearing it would be a stranger that awoke to greet him.

Royce picked up the notebook. The binding was broken and he blindly traced the crease that ran from top to bottom. Briefly his fingers caught on a tear and a thought arose—

Royce's old man in a wheelchair those first few days of his recovery, the ragged scar that lingered all those years later.

Just like her father.

Royce stood up. He started for the door, then went back for his revolver.

Anna called to him from the kitchen as he grabbed his VW keys. 'James,' she said.

'Where are you going?'

He paused in the open doorway and mulled it over. He honestly didn't know what was worse—leaving without a word, or telling her where he was going.

Farrow arrived at the pub just after midday. He wormed his way through the crowd, the millers bare foot and shirtless in the growing heat.

He approached the bar. 'Beer.'

Bluey was stacking bottles by the open flip-top. 'Will, mate. What the hell you doing here?'

Farrow dropped his coins on the counter. 'Make it a schooner.'

Bluey glanced around the room. He poured a drink, but was reluctant to let it go.

'Mate, just...' He shook his head and sighed.

With the sweating beer in hand, Farrow made his way over towards the pool tables. The laughter around him slowly petered out, the sound replaced with a hiss of whispers. As he passed a table a hand grabbed his forearm, Fitzie's gnarled fingers wrapped so tightly they dug into the skin. 'Fucking courage showing your face around here, mate,' he said.

Farrow pulled his arm free. He found Wayne and Harry sitting on their stools at the back of the room. When they saw him approaching across the pub floor, Harry slammed his near-empty drink on the tabletop.

Wayne rearranged his glasses. 'Ease down, Harry.'

'Seen your nephew lately?' Farrow asked. 'Heard a few people are looking for him. Coppers mostly.'

'If I see him, I'll let him know,' Wayne said.

Farrow could feel men gathering behind, encircling him. A thrown cigarette butt sparked on the floor by his feet. He took his time to finish his beer, placing the empty glass on the table next to Harry's.

'Well, better get to work,' he said. 'Lot to do. Good seeing you.'

Without waiting for a response from either man, Farrow pushed his way through the gathered mob. They parted for him, but the journey wasn't easy. A few of the men brought themselves uncomfortably close, their breath washing Farrow's face. He knew it was all show though. Like staring down your opponent at a weigh-in.

It was mid-afternoon, the harsh December heat finally starting to ease.

Royce prowled through the open carport, and into the backyard. A classical record was playing inside the house and the volume was louder than necessary, soaring strings rising above the harsh vinyl hiss. Maybe it wasn't just Madeline's leg that was giving out.

In the manicured backyard he found the man still sitting in the shade of the verandah awning. His body was limp in the wheelchair, fat tongue peeking from between wet lips. As Royce made his way up the wood stairs, the man let out a hum deep from within his throat.

Royce crouched down low, and showed him the photo of Rose. 'Was it you or Mick who got her wrapped up in all this?'

The man started to breathe heavily, snot glistening around the edges of his nostrils.

'I know you were part of it,' Royce said. He grabbed the man's hair, and moved his head so the twisting scar was clear. Uneven flesh crept up from shoulder to neck. 'There was no mill accident. You were the one who got clipped, weren't you? How did it feel to fuck up your first heist?'

Over the man's shoulder, Royce saw Madeline through the kitchen window, singing to herself as she brewed a kettle on the stovetop. Royce dropped lower, resting his weight on one knee. 'Does she know?'

The man let out another growl. He tried to lift his hand towards Royce's shoulder, but instead his whole body began to shake.

Royce pinned the man's arm down, squeezed his wrists. 'Where would they put her?'

The man said something, the sound nothing more than a gurgle. Royce leant closer, listening as he tried to speak again.

The man's face contorted into a grimace. 'I...I'm so...'

Nearby, the back flyscreen creaked open, and the music inside crescendoed briefly. 'You hungry?' Madeline said. 'Vegemite and cheese. Your favourite.' She was pushing open the door with her arse, and her back was to the yard.

Before she could turn, Royce broke from the cover of the verandah. He ran through the yard and out towards the road, body hunched close to the ground, eyes wide like an animal caught in the headlights.

Steam rose from the kitchen sink, the water inside leaving Nicole's hands red and raw. She scrubbed the dog's bowl with a scourer. Dried food came loose and muddied the water, leaving it the same colour as the flooded shaft up on Coffin's Reach.

The front door slammed at the other end of the house. Her father walked into the kitchen, his shirt damp with sweat, beer on his breath.

'Pack some things,' he said. 'Whatever you need for a couple of days.'

'Why?' she asked.

'No time. Just do as I say.'

Nicole shook her head, the tears welling. 'What if he comes back and no one's here to see him. He might go again.'

'I'll be here,' Farrow said.

She watched him disappear down the hallway. There were sounds coming from his bedroom, the closet door opening, and then something being dragged out across the floor.

Nicole held the calico bag against her chest as her father drove on in silence. Through the passenger side window, she saw the sun setting beyond the foothills. The roaming clouds were smothering the failing light, and the rays flared with their movement, almost like the pulse of lightning bugs in summer.

Her father pulled up into the driveway of a square brick building. 'Wait here,' he said.

Nicole watched from the passenger seat as he knocked on the door marked *UI*.
Mariah answered soon after in a bathrobe, hand around the collar so as to keep it closed. The two of them spoke quietly, and every so often the woman would glance towards the ute and give the girl a smile.

When her father finally returned, he opened the passenger side door. 'Grab your stuff,' he said.

Farrow locked the front door after arriving back home, then rattled the knob to double-check the mechanism was secure in the frame. He walked from room to room, drawing the blinds on each window, and as he moved he carried his work-light in his off-hand, the cable hooped around his shoulder.

When he was done, he positioned the light in the corner of the lounge-room, angled directly at the front door. He flicked the switch on the battery and the bulb burst to life. The entrance to the house was suddenly illuminated, every detail blown out by the halogen. He flicked the switch again and needled the cable through the legs of the couch.

In the rear shed he found a length of rope. He used it to secure the side gate, wrapping it through the palings, and tying the loose ends into a constrictor's knot. You wouldn't even see the rope in the dark of the night. And if you tried to open the gate, the binding would only grow tighter.

Farrow headed to his bedroom. On the floor was his father's duffle bag, the shotgun still inside.

Royce snuck inside through the rear flyscreen. He could hear Anna moving around the kitchen at the other end of the house, talking to Shaun as she prepared dinner. ‘Soon honey,’ she said, her voice laced with reverb. ‘Your Daddy will be home soon.’

After dressing himself in a pair of dark jeans and a plain black t-shirt, he searched the bathroom for painkillers. The bruises on his side and stomach were throbbing now, the flesh darker and more swollen than this morning, and he guessed a rib or two had been cracked in the scuffle yesterday afternoon.

The light in the hallway behind him flickered to life, and he saw Anna in the mirror above the sink. She didn’t look surprised to find him at home. ‘You’re off again?’ she asked.

‘Work,’ Royce told her, and it wasn’t entirely a lie. After his conversation with William Farrow yesterday, he had a feeling that Mick wasn’t choosing to lay low. He was a weak link, especially when you brought up his mother, and someone was making sure he wasn’t around to break under pressure.

Anna looked over his battered face. ‘Who’s this girl to you? Is it like last time? Did you know her?’

Royce leant down to wash his face in the sink. The tank outside had been baking in the summer sun all day and the water from the tap was surprisingly warm. ‘When did you talk to Eddie?’ Royce asked. ‘Same time you spoke to Dad?’

‘I don’t want to argue about this, all right?’

He turned to her. ‘What do you want then?’

‘I want you to finish this,’ she said. ‘Do what you have to do so we can move on. So you can be your old self again.’

‘I’m still me,’ Royce said. ‘I’m still here.’

‘Look at yourself. You can barely stand.’

She was right. Royce’s body was running on fumes. He wasn’t built for this kind of thing, and he knew it. ‘Go to my father’s place,’ he said. ‘Take Shaun with you and I’ll come and get you once everything has blown over. You’ll be safe there.’

‘And after that? What then?’

Royce took her in his arms. She nestled her face against his neck and he felt his shoulder growing damp. ‘Everything will be fine. I’m going to fix this.’

‘I know you will,’ she said.

Nicole waited in the lounge room of the flatette, a lone bulb above the front door filling the room with a smoky light.

Mariah emerged from the hall in a gingham dress, and the thick straps were left damp by her dripping hair. 'I'm sorry you can't watch anything,' she said. 'Never really was a big TV person, even when I was your age.'

The girl rearranged herself on the lounge, her mother's bag sitting awkwardly on her lap, the objects inside distorting the calico. 'What do you do here then?' she asked.

Mariah pointed to the bookshelf covering the far wall. Hardcover sat two deep and the sagging wood barely held their cumulative weight. 'Spend a lot of time with books,' she said. 'You read much?'

'Only at school,' Nicole said. 'Don't have many books at home.'

'I loved reading when I was your age. Guess it was a way of avoiding my parents and their arguments. I would sneak out of the house nearly every Saturday morning and walk all the way across town for the Warwick book bus. I used to ask my Dad for a lift, but he would never drive me. Don't know why. So I decided when I was old enough, I would buy every book I remembered borrowing as a kid. That way I could give them to my own children, and they would never miss out.'

'Do you have any kids?' Nicole asked. 'You know, somewhere.'

Mariah laughed. 'No, honey. Not yet.'

'Why not?'

Mariah forced a smile. 'You can borrow some of these,' she said. 'Keep them as long

as you want.’

‘I would like that,’ Nicole said.

‘You thirsty? I’ll get you something to drink.’ The woman made her way over to the attached kitchenette. When she flicked on the light, the shadow hiding a nearby wall disappeared, and a series of hanging photographs were suddenly revealed. One in particular caught Nicole’s eye. It was a black and white shot of the local school, a group of children lined up out front.

‘You see your father?’ Mariah asked. She passed the girl a glass of fizzing soft-drink. ‘That’s when we were both at school together. I’m there up front.’

Nicole saw her father standing at the back of the group, his tall and lanky frame towering above the other students.

‘What’s wrong?’ Mariah asked.

Nicole shrugged. ‘Never really seen a photo of him when he was young.’

‘Really?’ Mariah said. ‘I’ve got something to show you then.’

She disappeared into the bedroom for a moment, returning with a large scrapbook, spine held together with twine. She sat down on the couch next to Nicole and opened it across her lap. The pages were filled with posed photographs and newspaper articles. Nicole saw her father in all of them.

‘Will was always an amazing fighter,’ Mariah said. ‘I remember him winning the rural belt. First round knockout, only a minute on the clock.’

‘Why did he stop?’ Nicole asked. The girl was genuinely curious. Her father rarely spoke about his fighting days.

Mariah turned the page to the last article. The attached photograph featured her father at a weigh-in, a shirtless man with dark skin watching him from behind. The headline read: *Brisbane Brawl—Brickhouse Bill vs. Mike the Hammer*. ‘After your father won the rural

championship, he went out to Brisbane for some bigger fights. Didn't really see him much after that.'

'Did he start to lose?' Nicole asked.

'Why would you think that?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. Why else would he stop?'

Mariah closed the scrapbook and stood up. 'It wasn't like that. He had one bad fight, and then just retired. When he finally came back to the Well, he had your Mum with him. And then, a couple of months later, you were born.'

Nicole looked over her hands. Her mother's fingers were long and fragile, as if beneath the skin there were hollow bird bones. But Nicole's hands were much like her father's—wide-knuckled, the fingers broad and rectangular. When she had slept in the big bed with her mother in those months before her leaving, Nicole would often take her thin hand into hers and squeeze. She sometimes wondered if she was hurting her mother, and maybe she was simply too kind to say anything.

Mariah pointed to the bag on Nicole's lap. 'What you got there?'

The girl struggled for the words.

'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to.'

Nicole shook her head. 'I can show you if you like. But you'll have to sit down and close your eyes. That's part of it. You can't be peeking.'

Mariah tried to hide her smile. She sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of the couch and offered her hand. Nicole opened the bag and took out the dog bowl. When she placed it on Mariah's lap the woman flinched. 'Oh, it's cold.'

'That's his favourite bowl,' Nicole told her.

The woman took it in her hands and rolled it between her palms. 'You better look after this,' she said. 'For when he comes back.'

‘Close your eyes again,’ Nicole said. This time she passed Mariah the ivory hairbrush she had taken from the stranger’s home.

The woman thumbed the rigid bristles. ‘Was this your mother’s?’

Nicole’s face grew hot. She had no reason to lie to Mariah, but she had told herself the story over and over again, and it had almost become a truth. ‘Yes,’ Nicole said softly. ‘She gave it to me just before she left.’

Mariah reached up and wiped the girl’s cheek. ‘Go on then. What else have you got in there for me?’

They went through the ritual one last time.

Nicole passed Mariah the hare’s foot. When the woman opened her eyes, she let out a strangled cry from the back of her throat. She stood up and the foot fell to the ground, rolling away under the couch.

Nicole shook her head. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.’

‘Where did you get that from?’ Mariah said.

‘My friend gave it to me.’

The woman lent down and retrieved the foot from under the couch, the shotgun casing held tight between her fingertips. Soft fur fell away from the bone. ‘You can’t keep this,’ she said. ‘It’s starting to smell. You’ll get sick.’

‘You can’t throw it out,’ Nicole said.

Mariah took the foot over into the kitchenette. She opened the bin and dropped it inside. ‘What kind of friend gives you something like this? Was it that boy you told me about?’

Nicole wanted to stand up, retrieve the foot from inside the plastic lining, and take it with her as she ran back home. But her legs wouldn’t support her weight, and she had no choice but to sit there as she began to sob.

Harry ordered himself another schooner, then sat down at the back of the pub. Billiard lamps hanging above the nearby felt left tracts of shadow all around him, and he knew the regular drinkers struggled to see him sitting there, his features hidden from the light. But Harry could see them. With the wall behind his back, he could watch over the whole bar. And he did, his beading glass held tight in hand.

Wayne had left hours ago now. But Harry had nothing waiting for him at home like his boss did—no wife, no kids. Only an empty house and an empty bed. Some nights, when he was alone at the pub long enough, he would try his ex on the phone. But she wouldn't take his calls anymore after she got married. Slag had always been impatient. Assault was only seven years, even less with good behaviour.

The remaining millers crowded the television above the bar, an old game of cricket playing out across the screen. Fitzie's boy, Thomas, was among them and his rake arms crept out from a sleeveless band t-shirt. During an ad break he peeled away from the group. 'How you been, Harry?' he said.

The older man nodded.

'Was here this afternoon. Saw what happened.'

'And what exactly did you see?' Harry said.

The kid laughed. 'Old-man Farrow starting shit.'

'Man's younger than me.'

Thomas began to fidget. He hid his hands in his pockets before removing them again a second later. 'You know what I mean. Cunt thinks he can run one over on us. Too dumb to

get the message.’

Harry sipped his beer.

The kid continued to chatter. ‘Maybe we should let him know. Put him in his place or something.’

Harry thought of the dog. He loved the little buggers, and he was glad it wasn’t him that had to run the animal through. But sometimes a harsh message required a harsh method. They had given Farrow his space at first, mostly because it was easier to scare away the others. But now he was stirring up more trouble than he was worth.

‘Wayne’s taken care of it,’ Harry said. ‘Man got the message loud and clear.’

‘Well, it looks like he’s a slow learner. Me father says he’s a tough bloke. Turn everything into a fight if he can. Man like that seems like a bit of trouble to me.’

Harry drank deeply from his glass. He had done enough time to know the truth in what the kid was saying. Too many guys would try and buck the pecking order and it always ended up the same way. On the inside it was a shiv or a chokehold. On the outside though, the possibilities were endless.

‘You asking my permission?’ Harry said.

The kid glanced over his shoulder. A few of the men were watching them from afar, the air above their heads hazy with cigarette smoke.

Harry sighed heavily. ‘Wait here.’ He walked over to the bathroom doors at the back of the pub and fed his change into the payphone.

Wayne picked up after the first ring. ‘It’s late. Kids are asleep.’

‘What do you want me to do about Will?’ Harry said. ‘Some of the guys here think you’ve let it lie too long.’

‘Tell them I took care of it.’

‘I did,’ Harry said. ‘But if we don’t do something, they’re gonna take it into their own hands. Maybe now. Maybe in four or five beers.’

Wayne considered it. ‘Scare him, but nothing more. We don’t need another fuck-up like with the girl.’

‘I’ll make the call to our friend,’ Harry said. ‘Don’t want the cops showing up half way through if someone complains.’

‘You do that. And make sure they take Mick. Saw the kid today and he’s going stir crazy in there.’

The line went dead.

Harry hung up the phone and headed back to his seat. Thomas was tracing a faint line along the felt of the pool table with his fingernail. ‘So?’ he asked.

Harry swallowed the rest of his beer. ‘Go ahead.’

Wind raked the loose guttering outside the flatette.

It was getting late now, well past midnight, but still Nicole struggled to sleep. She rolled over in the unfamiliar bed and the loose springs groaned beneath her. She thought of Mariah out in the lounge room, lying on the couch, and for a moment she considered going out there and telling her they could share the bed. Just like she once did with her mother. But then Nicole remembered the foot, and the woman's face when she saw it. Their relationship had always been strange, but now something unsaid lay between them.

She sat upright on the mattress.

The drive over with her father this evening had been long and winding, yet she remembered the ute skirting the barren base of the foothills, not far from Bishop's shack.

Farrow crouched down low by the arm of the lounge. He loaded a shell into the shotgun, then shifted his weight to his haunches to ease the growing ache in his thighs. From this position he could see through the front blinds and out towards the road, the lone streetlight sketching the silhouette of the gum by the bitumen's edge. The wind picked up for a brief moment and a plastic bag tumbled along the gutter.

His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. There was a six-pack in the fridge, but he knew better than to drink before a fight. Back when he was training, his father would force him dry a few days before a big bout, his sparring sessions undertaken in track pants and a jumper to sweat out the last drops. 'Piss will only dull your senses,' his father would say. 'Leave you moving slow.'

As he sat there in the darkness of the house, Farrow's mind began to wander to the girl. What would happen to her if something went wrong tonight? Would her mother want her back after all this time? He gripped the stock of the shotgun tighter, the nerves in his fingertips growing numb.

In the distance he heard the drone of an approaching engine. A black ute pulled up across the road and Farrow saw at least four men sitting in the back tray, armed with pieces of wood and piping. One by one they piled out onto the bitumen, their footfalls loud. Farrow shifted out from a crouch. He rested his weight on one knee for better stability and pain seethed in his arthritic joints. He bit his lip to stifle a groan.

The armed men crept up through the yard, whispering between themselves. Two peeled away towards the side gate and Farrow held his breath. The wire rattled. But the

constrictor's knot gave no slack.

The remaining men out front paused in the middle of the yard. 'What the fuck are you doing?' one of them said. 'Keep it down.'

Someone around the side spoke up. 'I don't know. Gate's stuck or something.'

'Get your fucking arse back here then.'

The two men returned to the group. Moving as one unit again, they continued up the verandah steps and towards the front door. Farrow lost sight of them as they drew closer to the house. He heard the flyscreen creak open. Then, for a long while, there was nothing.

Someone knocked at the door. 'Open up, Will. We know you're in there.'

Before heading inside this afternoon, Farrow had parked his ute in the driveway, like he did every day. He didn't want the men thinking something had changed—that he was aware of their coming.

The voice continued. 'C'mon, mate. Don't make this harder than it needs to be.'

Farrow raised the shotgun to his shoulder.

The front door shuddered violently once, twice. The wood groaned and splintered. With his right hand, Farrow reached out for the battery by his side, his finger lingering above the switch.

With one last shriek of resistance, the lock gave out on the front door, and it swung wildly, colliding with the wall. The knob cracked the plaster and lodged itself there. Farrow flicked the switch. The charge travelled down along the wire he had hidden beneath the couch, and the bulb on the other side of the room suddenly burst to life, light filling the doorway. Farrow saw the men now, all of them shielding their eyes. He steadied the shotgun and pulled the trigger. The sound was deafening in the small room. Through the smoke he saw one of the men fall backwards. Another held his face and screamed.

Farrow cracked the weapon and began to load another shell into the breech from the

collection in his shirt pocket.

‘Run,’ someone yelled. ‘He’s got a fucking gun.’

The men scrambled away. One of them threw their pipe towards the light, and the glass shattered. Dying strobes ticked away in the sudden darkness. Farrow stood up and marched towards the front yard, shouldering aside the broken door. One of the attackers was dragging his fallen friend through the grass. Farrow took aim again. This time the weapon dry fired.

As the last of them piled into the back tray, Farrow made his way down the steps and towards the road. He emptied the useless shell as he moved. Up this close he could see the details of the vehicle as it drove away, the jacked suspension and oversized wheels familiar to him. It was a ute he used to see every day at work.

Midnight, the edge of town.

Royce checked the shopfront under the cover of darkness, but found the caravan empty, just like before. He planned his next move as he paced the causeway leading back to the road, following the fence that separated the yards. If someone was forcing Mick to go to ground, he thought, then the obvious hiding places were out.

The wind coming down from the foothills picked up for a moment, revealing a sliver of moon behind the clouds, and the yard next door filled with moonlight. Broken glass twinkled within the overgrown weeds. Something Mick had told Royce suddenly came to mind—this whole row of buildings was owned by Wayne.

In the pale light, Royce searched along the lopsided fence until he found a hole in the chain-link, the metal stretched wide by strong hands or a tool. Careful not to catch himself on the broken links, he climbed on through to the other side. The building next door was an old toy store. Someone had carved graffiti into the peeling paint on the back door and Royce could barely make the words in the poor light: *Squat rats 4eva, tims mum luvs dick, Stevo Cunningham is a poofter.*

He continued towards the next building in the long row. This fence was completely useless, the metal support posts bent in half by drunken teenagers or bored kids, and Royce stepped over onto the raised cement next door. Parked in the undercover causeway was a vehicle covered in a tarp, and he lifted the edges to see Mick's yellow ute. Hiding in plain sight this whole time.

The back door of the building was shut tight with a padlock and chain, links circled through the hole where the doorknob once was. Royce pushed on the wood to find it brittle. He leant back on one foot, and kicked hard above where the mechanism should be. The chain tore through the wood and the door yawned open in one harsh movement, remains hanging loose from the top hinge.

The interior of the building was pitch black and Royce squinted to see inside. Weeks ago he had driven past here with Walker, and he remembered the sheets of black plastic hanging in every window, sheltering the shopfloor from light. He blindly reached for a switch by the entrance but the wall was bare. Sweat prickled between his shoulder blades.

Moving forward into the murk, he smelt burnt food lingering in the narrow halls, mixed with something strong and heady like aftershave. With an outstretched hand, he followed the walls into a new room. Here he found a light switch, and he toggled it with his fist. The ticking halogen revealed signs of life. An army cot lay out on the floor, and it was draped in dirty clothes and a paper-thin blanket.

With the new light behind him, Royce doubled-back through the hallway, until he found the only other room in the building—a windowless storage space filled with stacked cardboard boxes. He opened the dusty flaps to find cigarettes and booze inside. Tyzinski was right. They couldn't offload the stuff fast enough.

Yellow light crept in at the edges of the black plastic, gleaming lines growing and then shrinking across the hallway walls. Royce headed back to the shop floor. He peeled the sheet back to see a ute parked out on the road, men in shorts and singlets sitting in the back tray. They climbed down onto the bitumen. But one man was struggling, a rag held to his chest, face contorted in pain.

The driver yelled at them from the open window, his voice familiar. 'I'll go get him now, all right? Be back in ten.' The ute took off down the road, engine warbling as it picked up speed.

Royce saw the men approaching the shop front. As they tried to let themselves in with a key, he ran back down the hall towards the storage room, pushing the door until it was almost completely closed. Through the gap he could still see the shop floor and front door.

Two men struggled inside, both of them dressed in shorts and singlets, and they held the injured man between them like he was Christ on the cross. They lowered him onto the cot and he let out a cry of pain. The bloody rag on his chest fell to the ground and Royce saw that his shirt was torn open, the skin beneath pocked and raw.

The first man rubbed his eye. 'Jesus. We're getting it everywhere. Grab us another rag, will you? Should be one out back. Left it on top of the boxes. Grab us a bottle while you're there.'

Royce's stomach twisted. The room was a dead end. He had no other choice but to press himself up against the wall behind the door. Footsteps quickly approached. The door creaked open and the wood nearly touched Royce's nose. He held his breath and watched as a thick arm reached inside for the rags and a bottle of rum.

The man left again back down the hallway.

Royce remained in the shadows between wall and door, scared to move in case he made a sound. Something warm dripped down his chin. He lifted his hand to find he had been gnawing at his own lip.

Someone unscrewed the bottle on the shopfloor. 'For the pain, mate.'

The groaning continued, even with the booze.

The first man spoke up again. 'If they don't show up soon, we're gonna have to take him to the hospital.'

‘Fuck off,’ said the other. ‘Harry will end us if we do that.’

They were both silent for a long time. Tyres whined on the gravel out front, and the front door to the shop opened a moment later.

‘It’s bad,’ the first man said. ‘Got clipped on the way up to the house.’

A new man spoke up and, like the driver of the ute, his voice was familiar. ‘He had a gun on him? What were you thinking? You cunts dense?’

‘Wouldn’t have tried if we knew about it.’

The cot creaked as someone leant their weight against the frame. ‘Look,’ the new man said. ‘Not even a real fucking round. Just salt. Bloody dog shot.’

‘Looks bad, but. And we can’t stop the blood.’

The new man sighed. ‘All right, all right. We’ll get him out of here. Jesus, I need a fucking smoke.’

‘But what about Farrow?’

‘Leave it lie. We got to take care of this first.’

‘What about the stuff?’

‘I’ll give Harry a call and let him know what’s going on.’

Royce listened as the men lifted their injured friend off the cot, then dragged him towards the door. An engine began to rumble outside not long after, and the sound grew fainter as the vehicle drove away down towards Caleb’s Road.

Royce hurried for the back door. With his heart pummeling in his chest, he moved through the back yard of the store, passing beneath the cover of the causeway. He paused for a moment, smelling tobacco smoke in the air, and an ember flared in his peripheral vision.

A shadowy figure by the ute flicked his cigarette. ‘You got to be fucking kidding me.’

Before Royce could turn, the figure ran towards him, crouching low so as tackle his legs. Royce tried to side-step out of the way, but it was no good. The man hit him on the

thighs and Royce toppled over. With his face now in the dirt, Royce felt the man punching him in the ribs, the same place as the other day. The prick had to be one of the guys who jumped him. No question about it.

A thick arm wrapped around Royce's throat and the man began to squeeze. With all his remaining strength, Royce pulled his head back fast, crown colliding with the attacker's nose. Hot blood exploded across Royce's neck and hair.

The man screamed as he tumbled off him. 'You fucking dirty bastard.'

Royce scrambled to his feet, struggling to steady his spinning head. He made a beeline for the broken fence, jumped over the bent supports, and ran through the yard next door. A flash of light burst over his shoulder and dust exploded in a plume before him. The sound of the gunshot rang out a second later. Royce dropped to the ground, hiding himself in the knee-high grass. He pulled his revolver from his belt.

The man yelled out. 'C'mon you piece of shit. Stand up.'

Royce searched the field for a possible exit. The graffiti covered door of the toy store loomed above him, and the frame was indented within a small alcove. On all fours, he crawled through the grass towards the cover. Another shot rang out and the sound was flat and dull in the open expanse. The man was firing blind now, growing impatient.

Royce stood up with his back against the door. He peered around the extended wall of the alcove. The man was crouching just beyond the collapsed fence, silhouette crooked over his pistol.

Royce pulled back into cover. 'Police. Throw down your weapon.'

Another shot rang out. Chunks of brick exploded on the wall above Royce's head. He dropped down into a crouch before peering out again. He returned fire, two shots in quick succession.

The man legged it towards the causeway, and disappeared behind the cover of Mick's ute. Royce kept the nub of his sight locked on the back tray. Soon his hands began to shake, and he stood back up. Move, he thought. Don't give him the time to flank you.

Royce searched the fence line for the hole in the chain-link. He pulled himself through and headed back towards the road.

XIV

After cleaning the house the best he could, Farrow started for Mariah's.

The morning sun was rising behind him as he drove, peeking above the distant foothills, and his tired eyes ached in the fiery light. He steadied his trembling hands on the steering wheel as the last blaze of adrenaline burnt itself out.

Mariah met him at the front door, her hair wild and unbrushed. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I don't know what happened.'

A chill ran through Farrow. He pushed his way inside the house, and Mariah followed him as he moved from room to room.

'I put her to bed,' she said. 'But when I got up she was gone.'

Farrow opened the bedroom door, but found no sign of the girl. 'Who was here last night?'

'No one,' Mariah said. 'I swear.'

'Did you go anywhere? Did anyone follow you?'

She stammered over her words. 'No. We were here the whole night.'

'Did the girl say anything before she went to bed?'

‘No. I—’ Something shifted in Mariah’s face. ‘We had a misunderstanding. She was upset. I think maybe she went to see a friend.’

Nicole had never said anything to him about a friend. ‘What’s their name?’

‘I don’t know, she never told me. But he’s a boy. Someone older.’

Farrow thought about the other day—Mick in Harry’s car, dropping off Nicole and the dog. Would they even dare? Would they go that far to hurt him?

He launched his fist into the wall. The stucco cracked under the force and the woman flinched, silent tears welling. He slowly brought his hand back down to his side, and left the house without a word.

Royce arrived at work to find Eddie's LandCruiser parked in the station driveway, the sight of it easing the spuming in his gut. All those weeks ago Tyzinski had told him to trust no one, but Royce's old man had personally vouched for the Sergeant. And after what had happened during the night, Royce needed someone he could trust.

Inside the station things were unusually quiet. Royce's body was still running on overdrive and the stillness of the place hummed in his ears like tinnitus. There was a familiar scent in the hallway, and he tried to place it—something caustic hidden beneath the tang of body odour.

'Eddie?' Royce said.

He found McIntyre hunched over his desk in the shift office, broad back towards the door. He didn't even bother turning towards Royce to speak. 'He's not in.'

'Four-wheel drive's out front,' he said. 'I'll just pop into his office.'

McIntyre sighed. 'Already told you, mate.'

Royce glanced towards Eddie's office. The door was shut tight, but a sliver of light crept out from the crack beneath. Something moved inside and a shadow passed momentarily across the gap.

'Where is he?' Royce asked.

'Let's go for a drive. I'll take you to him.'

'I can go myself,' Royce said. 'Is he at home?'

McIntyre stood up. He turned his bulk towards Royce and revealed a bruised face, the bridge of his nose held tight with a medical strip. Dark blood was crusted around the nostrils.

Royce kept a straight face. 'Mate, what happened to you?'

McIntyre's pistol hung loose by his side. 'Get in the four-wheel drive. And don't make me ask you again.'

Nicole awoke to the sound of a kookaburra outside the shack. Others slowly joined the call until a staccato chatter filled the clearing.

Bishop watched her from the open door. ‘How’d you sleep?’

She sat up in bed and rubbed her aching neck. The walk over from Mariah’s last night had been long, and she had lost her way more than once amid the trees that grew angled on the hill face. But Bishop showed no surprise at her sudden appearance, and he let her share the cot with him, both of them sleeping side-by-side on the stretched material. ‘Tired,’ the girl said.

‘I’ll grab some kindling. Boil the billy for a cuppa.’

Nicole nodded. ‘Thanks. You know, for everything.’

Bishop scratched his nest of hair. The grass began to rustle and churn beyond the clearing and he turned towards the sound.

A voice called for him. ‘Bishop. Get your arse out here.’

Through the open door Nicole saw a tall man with a beard wading through the undergrowth. The same man who delivered the envelope for her father. He looked angry and Nicole wondered if he was here to take her home.

‘What’s wrong?’ Bishop asked.

‘Shit’s hit the fan,’ the man said. ‘We have to move the stuff. Now.’

Bishop glanced at the girl on the bed, and the movement attracted the bearded man’s attention. He looked into the shack, eyes narrowing. ‘What the fuck is going on here?’

‘She’s got nothing to do with this,’ Bishop said. ‘She—’

The man reached out and grabbed Bishop's curly hair in a fist, snapped his head back hard. A wet sound burbled in his throat.

'Come with me now,' the man said. 'Bring the girl.'

When Fitzie's face peered through the crack of the door, Farrow kicked the wood hard. The force was enough to send the man stumbling backwards and he tripped over his own feet, breath knocked out of him as he hit the ground.

He pulled the man up off the floor by the collar of his shirt. 'Where's your boy?'

Fitzie's bottom lip was split like an overcooked sausage. 'What the fuck, Will? Door hit me right in the face.'

Farrow slapped the man with an open palm. 'Where is he?'

'Jesus Christ, mate,' he said. 'Down in front of the telly.'

Farrow let go of the man's shirt and his fat legs gave out under his own weight. He found Thomas in the lounge room. The boy was sleeping on the couch shirtless, and a bloodstained bandage was wrapped around his chest and shoulder. Farrow leant down behind the couch, gripped the bottom of the wooden frame, and tipped it like a hay bale. The kid let out a scream as he toppled onto the floor. Farrow hauled him back upright, and then slammed him against the wall, the force rocking a nearby photograph from its hook.

'Where's Mick?' Farrow said. 'Where's Harry?'

Thomas' eyelids began to flutter, revealing dilated pupils. He was doped up on painkillers to forget the damage, but Farrow helped him remember. He knuckled the shotgun wound. 'Tell me. Now.'

Thomas screamed. 'Fuck. I don't know. Haven't seen them.'

'Bullshit. I saw your ute last night. And you didn't visit me on your own.'

'What the fuck are you talking about old man?'

Farrow pushed harder, blood seeping up through the gauze.

Someone spoke up from the doorway. Farrow looked over his shoulder to see Fitzie slumped up against the frame, towel held against his bleeding lip. 'Just look at him, son. It's not worth fighting it. Neither one of us would come out okay. Just tell him where they are.'

Farrow climbed up into the ute. The shotgun lay wrapped in a blanket on the seat beside him, and he unfurled the weapon onto his lap. There were only three remaining shells in the top pocket of his shit. He knew each to be live.

Before Royce could open the passenger side door, McIntyre shoved him up against the LandCruiser bonnet, patted him down, and took the revolver from his belt.

‘Get in,’ McIntyre said.

Royce did as he was told, ribs aching. The other man circled the vehicle, and clambered up behind the wheel. He hid the confiscated weapon beneath his seat.

They drove along the main road through town, out past Farrow’s place and towards the foothills. Before leaving the station McIntyre had made a quick phone call, the conversation short. Royce had only heard a few quiet words: ‘Yeah...I got him...the usual place, right...’

‘Where are we going?’ Royce asked.

McIntyre shifted gears.

‘C’mon, mate,’ Royce said. ‘You know you don’t have to do this.’

Without taking his eyes off the road, McIntyre struck Royce in the sternum with a closed fist. He began to dry wretch, a string of drool dripping onto the carpet.

‘Shut the fuck up,’ McIntyre said.

A ribbon of sparse land rolled by the passenger side window. They passed the sign saying *Coffin’s Reach*, and McIntyre turned the LandCruiser onto the dirt track, dropping the vehicle to a crawl. Royce saw Wayne waiting up ahead. His lithe frame was resting against the bonnet of his car.

McIntyre switched off the engine. He pulled Royce out of the LandCruiser, and forced him to his knees. Hot wind stung his bruised face.

Wayne strolled over to them. ‘Royce, lad. You’ve really fucked up, haven’t you? Should’ve done as we said. Let things lie. That way we could’ve avoided all this trouble. And you could’ve kept Eddie out of it.’

The smell back at base suddenly made sense to him. Someone had fired a weapon in the confines of the hallway, and they had done so recently. Royce couldn’t help but wonder what lay beyond Eddie’s door, and whether it was still breathing. ‘Is this what happened at Maloney,’ he said. ‘You sort trouble with a gun now? Big man killing two innocent people?’

McIntyre ground the barrel. ‘Hardly innocent, mate.’

‘Had to be done,’ Wayne said. ‘Couldn’t let a couple of greedy junkies ruin everything we’ve worked for. What did you expect us to do? This town couldn’t survive without us.’

Tyzinski had been right all along, Royce thought. This was bigger than booze and cigarettes. These days, if you wanted to make the real cash, you had to involve yourself in the major sellers—coke or heroin. If you were careful about it, and you weren’t a junkie using your own product, you could make quite a bit of cash. If you were lucky enough to be calling the shots, you could even make enough for a larger investment. Something like the mill and its inbuilt distribution system, or maybe even half a town.

Wayne took off his glasses. Without the frames demarking his face, his features looked shaved to a point. ‘Look, we could talk all day, lad. But I brought you out here for a reason. I just wanted to tell you that, despite what has been said and done, I would have never let them hurt your wife or son, all right? No matter what happened. I just needed you to know that.’

‘People are going to start asking questions,’ Royce said. ‘Some of the cops at Central already have their eye on what’s happening here.’

McIntyre spoke up from behind. ‘I think he means Tyzinski.’

Wayne polished his glasses with a shirttail. 'Doesn't matter who comes knocking, Royce. They've got nothing on us.'

The story they were telling him was clear. It was his name on the Maloney register, not theirs. And now he was going to disappear, his absence an admission of guilt. 'Doesn't add up,' Royce said. 'There's too many holes.'

Wayne crouched down to eye level. 'It doesn't have to add up, lad. A cop with a troubled past gets involved in drugs? Shoots his own boss to get away with it? The whole thing is a mess of the highest order. Newspapers and radio have already crucified the commissioner for less. Trust me, the higher-ups are gonna sweep this all under the rug as soon as they can.'

Royce's stomach dropped. 'But Tyzinski knows about the Painters and Dockers. He knows about the robberies.'

McIntyre jabbed him again. 'Doesn't matter what some detective reckons he knows, mate. All that matters is that the right people are getting an envelope on their desk every month, with enough cash to buy a blind eye.'

Harry's Charger wound its way up through the balding hillside, headed for the overhanging reach. Slowly the miner's camp rose into view. The rusted tin roofs were dun in the morning light and a lone cockatoo shuffled from one corrugated slope to the next.

Nicole sat in the back seat with Bishop, and she held the older man's hand in hers. They pulled up beside a yellow ute. A young man sat in the cab and he was familiar to the girl, blonde hair pulled back tight in a knobbed ponytail.

'Wait here,' Bishop said as he opened the Charger door.

'No way, mate.' Harry stared at them both in the rear-view mirror. 'Look at the little lady. More than strong enough to give us a hand.'

Bishop bit his lip. 'I don't know.'

The huge man turned in his seat. 'Listen, you dumb cunt. I know you're retarded, but you're not fucking deaf. Get the girl out of the car, and go open the shack door.'

Bishop helped Nicole out of the Charger. She thought of the mine near here, the body hidden within, and her legs began to tremble.

Bishop leant close to Nicole and whispered, almost as if he was reading her mind. 'Don't worry. I won't let anything bad happen.' He gestured to the knife on his belt. 'No one will get close to you. I promise.'

McIntyre steered the LandCruiser towards the base of the foothills. Through the windscreen Royce watched as the land on either side of them slowly rose up, squeezing inwards until they were forced to stop the vehicle completely. But the trail continued upwards into a fissure lying ahead, almost like a pathway cut into the hillside itself.

McIntyre pulled Royce outside. With the pistol pressed against his back, he was forced into the shadowy passage. Loose stones tumbled from above, and the patter of sound travelled along the rocky trail, the sheer walls carrying the echoes.

When they suddenly reached a t-intersection, McIntyre pushed Royce right with a nudge of the barrel. They kept moving in silence. Beneath his feet he could see a set of rails hidden in the dirt.

McIntyre eased past him after reaching a dead-end. He pulled away a piece of tin sheeting to reveal a shaft running deep into the hillside. Pure darkness lay within, and a familiar smell.

McIntyre motioned with the pistol. 'In you go.'

Royce stared into the blackness. 'You know my wife is pregnant, right?'

McIntyre's face was unyielding.

'Come on,' Royce said. 'You've got your own kids.'

'Get in the fucking hole.'

'Is that why you're doing this?' Royce asked. 'For your kids? Mate, whatever they're paying you, it's not worth the cost. You killed two people in cold blood.'

McIntyre flinched.

‘That’s right,’ Royce said. ‘I know it was you. There were two men at Maloney that night. Harry seems the type, but Mick clearly doesn’t have the guts. Who does that leave?’

‘Shut the fuck up,’ he whispered.

‘Rose figured it all out, didn’t she? Exactly what kind of men she was dealing with. Is that why she tried to steal the cash and leave? You kill her for it? You think your little girl can live with that?’

McIntyre whipped Royce across the cheek with the pistol. He staggered backwards against the stony wall, sucked at his loose teeth, and spat blood into the dirt.

The constable grabbed him again, this time by the hair, and shoved him into the dark opening. A light flickered on behind Royce and he turned to see McIntyre carrying a battery-powered lantern in his off-hand. They continued deeper into the heart of the foothill, both men crouched low so as not to hit their heads on the shallow ceiling. The familiar smell was growing stronger now, and it left a bitter taste creeping up into Royce’s mouth, like acid bubbling on a dying battery.

The shaft suddenly opened up into a larger chamber. McIntyre shepherded him towards the rear wall with a push. In the lamp’s circle of light Royce saw the floor dip away into a shallow basin, then a pale foot leading to an exposed thigh, arms pushed into sharp angles. He didn’t need to see the face to know who it was.

‘Get on your knees,’ McIntyre said. ‘Don’t make me drag you down after.’

Royce turned around. He saw the barrel of McIntyre’s pistol shaking. ‘Did you wait until Eddie’s back was turned?’ he asked.

‘Knees,’ McIntyre said. ‘Now.’

‘Nah, mate. You’re going to have to look them in the eye this time.’

McIntyre pushed the barrel into Royce’s stomach.

From somewhere outside a hollow crack broke the silence, the sound echoing down the fissure and filling the shaft. To most people it could be mistaken for anything—maybe a door slamming, or a tree toppling. But both Royce and McIntyre knew it to be a shotgun blast.

McIntyre turned towards the entrance of the mineshaft. With his attention diverted, Royce grabbed the man's weapon hand and twisted it. McIntyre screamed and pulled the trigger, the report deafening in the confines of the shaft. Royce wringed harder and McIntyre dropped the pistol. 'Fuck,' he yelled.

Royce pushed him backwards with his shoulder, and the man tripped. When he hit the ground the lamp shattered against the floor. The cavern was suddenly plunged into near complete darkness. Panic gripped Royce's guts. His ears were ringing from the pistol blast, but he could hear McIntyre struggling to his feet, breath heavy. 'Stay where you are. Don't you dare move.'

Royce used the sound of the man's voice to cover his movement. Without thinking, he felt his way along the chalky floor until he found the far wall of the chamber. He laid himself flat against the jagged stone. The flash of the pistol had been overwhelming in the dim, and he tried to blink away the stripe of light singed across his vision.

McIntyre continued his search for the dropped weapon. 'You can't get out of here, James,' the Constable said. 'Give it up.'

The sound of a second shotgun blast tore through the shaft. And then a third. Royce edged his way along the wall towards the rear basin, nearly stumbling over Rose's exposed body.

'You can't get past me, mate,' McIntyre said.

The distant entrance to the shaft created a pinprick of light in the darkness, and Royce positioned himself so that it lay directly before him. He reached down and fossicked the dirt for a rock, and his fingers brushed Rose's cold skin. Over the last month, he had created an

image of the girl in his mind, an effigy of innocence tainted. But now he knew better.

Whoever she was, or whoever she would be, was gone now. Her life reduced to nothing more than meat and fat and cartilage. Royce thought about Anna and Shaun making their way to his father's house in the mountains. Again, their lives were upheaved, and for what? One more body hidden in the darkness? One more girl for the pyre?

'I know you're still there,' McIntyre said. 'You think if you can get away that will be it? I'll hunt you down, you bastard.'

With every word, Royce took a step forward, closer towards the entrance. Suddenly the pinprick of light disappeared and he froze. McIntyre was blocking his way. Royce could hear him breathing only a few feet in front of him. He threw the rock in his hand hard against the distant wall, and the Constable pivoted towards the sound, light appearing again briefly before blinking out. Royce leapt forward and struck McIntyre in the darkness, the two men toppling over into the dirt, and he wrestled his way on top.

He knew he didn't have the strength to take the man on in a fair fight, so he had to be quick. He grabbed McIntyre's hair between his fingers and slammed his head hard against the stone floor. A closed fist glanced across Royce's collarbone. Another clipped his ear. But Royce kept pounding McIntyre's head, again, and again. The sound was a dull thud at first, but slowly grew wet. From deep within McIntyre's throat a low gurgling escaped.

With his breath tearing through his throat, Royce ran back through the dwarfed shaft, into the light outside. He shielded his eyes with a hand and his fingers traced slick warmth across his face. He looked down to see that his arms were covered in blood, torn hair matted beneath the fingernails.

Royce followed the curve of the fissure until he reached the sudden t-intersection. He heard a man cry out in pain, and expected to see McIntyre on his tail, uniform shirt stained with dirt, reaching for him with burly arms. But when the cry rang out again, Royce realised it

was coming from the other path, the one leading away from the LandCruiser. He weighed it up. You got no idea where it leads, he thought. Or who's waiting for you on the other side.

He jogged back to the vehicle as fast as his aching body would allow, and retrieved his revolver from beneath the seat.

Royce followed the rails out onto an overhanging reach of land, the Well laid out beneath like a fragile diorama. He recognized a familiar ute parked between a tight circle of primitive shacks, and he saw the owner sitting in the dirt, back against the rear wheel.

Royce approached with his revolver raised.

'He fucking shot me, mate,' Mick said. 'Fucking shot me.'

Mick's neck and cheek were pocked with pellets from a shotgun cartridge, his shoulder shredded. Royce crouched down and tore a strip from Mick's shirt, then wrapped it around the worst of the damage.

'Pressure here,' he said. 'You're losing blood.'

Mick did as he was told, his hands shaking.

'Who shot you?' Royce asked.

No response. Mick's pupils were wide, and for a moment Royce thought he was gone. But when he checked the man's wrist he found a pulse. Weak, but there.

Another man lay sprawled in the open doorway of the closest shack. The doorframe above was splintered by a missed shot. Between his feet there was a cardboard box and the contents had spilled out across the dirt—brown packages wrapped in tape. Royce went to check on him. But as he approached it became clear he was too late. The bearded man had

no eyes, nose, or mouth left. The hole in his head was nothing more than a wet crater of shattered bone and gore.

Royce took one of the packages into his hand. He tore it open to find a muddy powder he recognized as cheap heroin. He threw the package towards the ground again and it landed on top of Harry's body.

A girl's voice filled the reach. 'Dad, no.'

Royce turned on the spot, searching for the source. He saw movement halfway up the incline, three figures weaving between the trees—a man he recognised as Farrow, a teenager, and a little girl. Farrow was stalking the hillside with a shotgun hanging loose in his hand, and the teenager and girl were cowering from him, scrambling upwards towards a wire fence bisecting the incline.

Royce started for them in a run. As he drew close, he noticed the teenager was swinging a knife at Farrow.

'Police,' Royce yelled.

Farrow dropped the shotgun before lunging at the boy. During their scuffle, the girl was pushed to the ground. She let out a scream as she tumbled down the incline, limbs spraying dust. Farrow knocked the teenager onto his knees and wrapped a powerful hand around his throat as they fought for the knife.

Royce raised his revolver, but he was running too fast for any accuracy. 'Police,' he yelled again. 'Get on the ground.'

Still struggling for the knife, Farrow let go of the teenager's throat and started to wail on his forearm with a closed fist. The teenager howled and dropped the knife. His arm hung loose by his side, the bone broken clean in two.

When Royce finally reached them up on the incline, Farrow had the teenager on the ground. His punches were wild now, devastating. They landed on his jaw, chest, neck,

forehead. Spit flew from Farrow's mouth and his voice was guttural. 'Not my girl. Not my fucking girl.'

Royce aimed his revolver. 'Farrow. Stop it.'

His punches grew slower, more labored. Almost like a machine turning down after a loss of power. The teenager beneath him was shaking now, blood bubbling from his shattered mouth.

Royce said his name again. 'Leave it. He's done.'

Farrow eased himself up. His back was bowed and each breath ragged. He stared past Royce, down towards the reach. 'Nicole,' he said. 'You okay? Did they hurt you?'

Royce turned to see the girl on all fours behind him, gripping the tufts of grass as if to tether herself. The skin on her shaking arms was scraped raw by her fall, and blood stippled her face like a violent constellation.

1988

I

Farrow unbuttoned his blues and draped them across the foam mattress. In the strip of moonlight creeping in from the mesh window above his bunk, he began to shadowbox, punches pulling short so as not to collide with the narrow brick walls.

Normally a prisoner called Gaz occupied the cell next door. But Farrow hadn't seen or heard from him in nearly a fortnight. Someone told Farrow the guards bashed him after a fight in the yard, and he was being kept in one of the old black holes—didn't matter the government banned them. Farrow honestly didn't mind. The kid was a constant talker, and he was thankful for the silence.

Hot breath tore through Farrow's mouth with every punch. His bare feet padded loudly on the cement floor.

Someone on the same tier yelled at him. 'For fuck sake. Shut up, will you?'

'Keep it down,' a screw cried out from the bottom of the wing.

Farrow wiped himself down with his shirt before sitting on his bunk. A place like this had a set of rules, both written and unwritten, and nary one of them made sense in the outside world. But after everything that had happened back at home, Farrow knew sometimes it wasn't worth the fight.

On his way down to the yard, Farrow heard the prisoner behind him speak up, his voice barely more than a strained whisper. ‘Oi, mate,’ he said. ‘You the boxer?’

Farrow looked over his shoulder to see a young bloke, head shaved, no more than twenty. He was new to Boggo and Farrow hadn’t yet caught his name. A black swastika tattoo peeked out from under the collar of his blues.

‘No,’ Farrow said.

They made their way down the zigzagging stairs of the cellblock, each prisoner following the man in front. There were too many feet on the raw iron steps and the reflected sound was overwhelming, near every surface in the building made of metal or concrete. The guy tried him again on the bottom floor. ‘Everyone says you’re real tough. Used to be a champion and all that.’

This time Farrow found him smiling. His front tooth was missing and the gum around was torn and uneven. ‘Well,’ he said. ‘Is it true?’

The prisoner behind the guy spoke up. ‘Donavon. Not now.’

The man called Donavon thumbed his runny nose. ‘Whatever.’

Most days Farrow worked in Boggo’s kitchen. He was assigned to wash the counters and mop the floors, but someone had caught wind of his previous job at the mill, and the screws often got him to fix the broken appliances, lending him the tools and equipment necessary.

Farrow didn't mind the extra work. It was comforting to him—the movements coming almost unconsciously.

Today he was taking apart a stovetop that wouldn't ignite, and the two guards assigned to the job watched him from across the room. They spoke quietly between themselves as he worked.

'You hear they got wind of another riot?' the first said. 'Found the details on a scrap of paper. Dickhead tried to hide it in his slop bucket. Simmons reckons it was planned for expo. Trying to get the media attention.'

The second chimed in. 'I don't blame them, mate. You've seen the condition of this place. Rats in the cells. Mould bloody everywhere.'

'You know they've dropped me down to half shifts next month, right? Same with a bunch of other fellas. It's not enough men to cover things if it all goes pear-shaped again.'

'Brought it up at the meeting you missed. Boss said there wasn't enough money to cover payroll. Shifts are going to the oldest fellas first, which is a load of bullshit if you ask me. Apparently seniority means priority'

Farrow laughed.

The first guard uncrossed his arms. 'You find that funny?'

'Just remembering an old joke,' he said.

An alarm began to wail from the tower, and the two guards rushed to the window overlooking the loading dock. Farrow joined them. Through the glass he could see two prisoners grappling outside, their fight taking place on top of a pile of spilt laundry. The screws on patrol ran over, took out their batons, and started wailing on them.

'This fucking place,' the first guard said. 'Stay here long enough and I'll be one of them.'

The second turned to Farrow. He motioned outside with his head. 'How about you? Look like you miss that kind of thing?'

Farrow wiped the soot from his hands with a rag.

Early the next morning, he heard the peal of footsteps on the catwalk outside his cell.

A screw dropped the door hatch. 'You're up. Let's go.'

Farrow followed the guard to the public phone. He wiped the mouthpiece clean with the bottom of his shirt, then dialed the number from memory. She picked up on the first ring. 'Hello? Will?'

'Did you find the papers I was talking about?' he asked.

'You're late. Is everything okay?'

He swapped the receiver to the other ear. 'I'm fine. The papers?'

'They were with your old stuff,' Mariah said. 'Just like you told me.'

'Send them to the cop,' he said.

'You're still talking to him?'

The screw watching from the doorway held up a finger—one minute remaining.

'You speak to them?' Farrow asked.

'They're doing good,' Mariah said. 'Nicole's still going to school. I could ask her to come and visit if you wanted. It's only a couple hours drive from Warwick.'

Farrow thought of the fight yesterday. 'No.'

'One day you'll get out of there,' Mariah said, 'and she'll be waiting for you. You can't do this to yourself forever.'

Farrow remembered what the girl called him that day on the reach, after he had tried to console her. An animal. A monster. Just like his father before him. This is where someone like him belonged. It's where he had to stay. 'Make sure you send the papers.'

'Will,' Mariah said. 'You can't do this to your—'

The guard depressed the button on the payphone. 'Time's up.'

Later that afternoon, Farrow paced the length of the crowded exercise yard, winding his way through the tight-knit groups. A couple of Aboriginal prisoners sat at the far end of the yard, taking up a row of benches bolted into the cement, and Farrow asked them if he could take the one free spot. They whispered to each other, then stood up and left.

He looked over his shoulder to see space around him, a rare occurrence on the inside. Prisoners were backing away towards the other end of the yard and their movements were slow, almost imperceptible to the guards outside the fence. But a group of seven skinheads stood their ground close to Farrow, and it wasn't long until they were at the head of the crowd. Donavon was standing among them. The kid's shirt was wrapped around his waist.

Farrow quickly understood what this was, and he folded up his sleeves. He kept the bolted bench close behind him. 'I know you want to impress your new friends,' he said. 'Prove how tough you are. But there's not going to be a fight today.'

The skinheads watched him from afar, their faces pursed tight, tattooed bodies coiled with tension. One of them nudged Donavon forward.

The kid struggled to get out the words. 'No choice.'

'Not for me,' Farrow said. 'Not anymore. What about you?'

Donavon reached into his pocket with a shaking hand. He kept it there, wrapped around something unseen. The yard slowly fell silent around them.

When Donavon finally lunged for him, Farrow sidestepped the attack. Using the man's own momentum, he tripped him, and slammed his face against the steel bench. Warm blood sprayed across Farrow's chest and neck. The crowd behind him began to jeer and stomp the ground with their feet. Farrow kicked the shiv from Donavon's hand. He heard panicked voices outside the yard now.

Farrow rolled Donavon over onto the cement. The man's forehead was split wide-open, blood pouring into his eyes. 'Not a fight,' Farrow said, 'if you never stood a fucking chance.'

It took three guards to pull Farrow off the man, and another two to finally get the cuffs on.

II

Nicole headed straight to her bedroom after arriving home from school. She passed her mother in the hallway and Molly stopped the girl with a hand. She was wearing a man's faded Broncos jersey, the sleeves hanging low below her wrists.

'How was today?' Molly asked. 'No trouble?'

Nicole pulled at the loose strap of her bag. 'Fine.'

'Teacher see your homework?'

'Do we have to do this everyday?'

Molly kissed her on the forehead. 'I'm just glad you're trying again. Proud of you, you know?'

The girl shrugged.

Her mother continued to speak as she entered the kitchen, voice now distant. 'Dave will be over later to watch the game. I want you to be nice to him this time, all right? He's a good bloke. Maybe we can have his son over for dinner soon. Like a big family.'

Nicole closed her bedroom door. She dumped her bag on the bed and switched on the desktop radio. The miniature speakers slowly hissed to life. Pummeling drums filled the

room, followed by a descending bass guitar. Nicole knew the song well, and she lay on her bed and sang along with the baritone vocals.

When her Aunt was home, Nicole wasn't allowed to listen to the radio, or make too much noise at all. She was a night-shift nurse, and she needed to sleep most days. 'It's my sister's place,' Molly had told her. 'Without her we'd be on the streets, or in the bush.' But Nicole could honestly think of worse ways to live.

When the song slowly faded into the next, Nicole sat upright and unzipped her bag. She took out the hunting knife. A few months ago, just before Christmas, Nicole had found a man's wallet sitting on a front verandah. She had used the leather as the base for a simple sheath, roughly fashioning it with cooking scissors and her mother's sewing kit. It was hardly perfect, but it did the job. And besides, the knife was all she had left of him now, and she had to take care of it the best she could.

Somebody knocked at the front door of the house, and Nicole turned off the radio to hear her mother speaking to someone out in the yard—the man's voice rough and croaking. She headed to the lounge room to find the television on, the news broadcasting a low-angle shot of a tin-roof, men on top holding bedsheets like placards. Slogans were written across the material: *stop all torture now, close 2 division now!* The news anchor continued to speak over the images.

...After a violent and terrifying riot, the Boggo Road Gaol hunger strike has now reached its 12th day, and tensions are still rising as police try to end a new stand-off. It seems as if five men have made their way to the roof of F-Wing, a building overlooking Brisbane city. According to reports, the men scaled the walls carrying bedsheets and paint so as to create messages for the public and news cameras below. Protesting the conditions of the infamous Boggo Road Gaol, the men are pushing for a state inquiry into penal conditions...

Nicole peeled back the front curtains to see her mother standing by the garden, an older man beside her. Nicole recognised him as the police officer from Caleb's Well. He held a package in one arm, and leant his weight against a walking stick

She listened to them speak through the open window.

'Wanted to see how you were doing,' the officer said.

Molly yanked a weed from the garden bed. 'I told you not to come around here again. She doesn't need the reminder.'

'Don't want to cause any trouble,' he said. 'I was only dropping by. How's Nicole, anyway? She still at school?'

Molly threw the weed out into the grass. 'She's doing fine. Doing well, actually.'

Nicole couldn't understand why her mother was lying to him. Although she went to school every day, she was still struggling—to make friends, to pay attention. She often found her mind wandering in the classroom, and it left her thoughts inconclusive, almost scattershot.

The school was meant to be a new start for her. And even though the children in her class were older now, as she herself was, they acted much the same as they did in the Well. Over the last few months, one boy in particular had begun to target her. The other day he had shoved her against the lockers after class and yanked at her hair. 'Fuckin' dyke,' he had said as he pressed himself against her. 'You wanna root? You want me to turn ya?' Nicole had tried to fight back, but the boy was too strong. She had told her mother about what had happened, but she refused to do anything: 'We can't go taking you out of school again, sweetie. You've lost so much these last few years, I'm not going to let you lose your education.'

That's why Nicole took the knife to school. She wasn't going to hurt him, but she just wanted him to know. She wanted him to see the blade in her hand and the glint of the

metal. But when the time finally came, she couldn't do it. Not because she didn't want to, but because she realised it wouldn't matter. People like that would never change unless they chose to, and she couldn't force such change upon them. It was much simpler just to remove the trouble from your life completely, like Bishop did with his stepfather.

'That's good,' the officer said. 'I'm glad she's doing okay.'

Nicole's mother stood close to the man. 'Okay? She watched her father shoot two men, one of them dead. And then she had to sit there and watch him beat her friend to death. She's doing the best she can, but that doesn't mean she's okay.'

'I know that. But you should take her to see him at least. Just the once.'

'You need to leave,' she said.

The officer passed her the package from under his arm. 'Look, give the girl this. I know I'm a little late, but I remember the file. It was her birthday last week.'

Molly took the package from his hand. She opened the lid and looked inside. 'She's fifteen, you know. Not a kid anymore.'

The man shook his head. 'Just think about taking her.'

He limped back to the road, and eased himself into a car. Her mother looked into the package once more as he drove away, then threw it into the wheelie bin by the road's edge.

On the television screen beside her, Nicole saw a clip of someone interviewing a prison guard. His eyes were wide and his hands were trembling. 'It's just bloody nuts in there, mate,' the guard said to the presenter. 'Like sharks after smelling blood. I was just glad to get out, you know?'

Molly came back through the front door. 'Nicole, sweetie. What are you doing with yourself out here?'

The girl switched off the television, the image shrinking into a thin bar before blinking out completely. 'Nothing,' she said.

After her mother had gone to bed for the night, Nicole began to load her backpack with spare clothes, tins of food, the knife, and a blanket. It wasn't much, but she knew she could always take what she needed while on the road, like she used to back in the Well.

In the feeble light of her bedroom lamp, she slipped the straps over her shoulders and tested the weight. It was heavy for her thin frame, the material digging into the muscles along her neck and back. But she knew over time the burden would become familiar to her, maybe even comforting.

Outside she rummaged through the wheelie bin by the road, searching for Sergeant Knowle's package. She hauled it out onto the grass and opened the lid. Inside was a stuffed rabbit, the fur ghostly white in the moonlight. Nicole turned the toy over in her hands and felt the softness of the stuffing. She brought it close to her nose, taking in the faint perfume of strawberries.

With her Aunt's house now behind her, she began to walk, following the road up towards the edge of town. She did not yet have a destination in mind, but that didn't matter. Maybe it never would. All that counted was the steps she took, the growing distance of space, of time.

Eddie's old office was nothing like he'd left it. The filing cabinets were overflowing with paperwork and evidence bags, and someone had trodden through a spilt ashtray.

Walker looked up at him from behind the desk. 'Mate. Good to see you.'

Eddie prodded the carpet with his walking stick. 'What's with the baby blue, mate?'

'Goes with the uniform,' he said. 'Besides, I should've sent you the bloody bill. It was your fault we had to bin the old stuff. Teach me for being late. Five minutes earlier and I might have saved the floor.'

Eddie remembered it well. The stain had been stark on the cream coloured carpet—an uneven blotch so dark it was almost black. If he were to tear up the new stuff right now, he was sure the raw floorboards beneath would still be stained with his blood. He sat down opposite. 'How you doing, anyhow?'

'You know,' Walker said. 'It's a tough gig. Only got one lackey these days. So I can't be palming it off like you used to.'

Eddie had noticed the shift office upon first entering. The room was pretty much bare these days, only one desk inside for the new constable.

'How's the new fella doing?' Eddie asked. 'He coping with the Well?'

Walker fingered a pen on his desk. 'She, actually.'

'Bloody hell,' he said. 'A woman copper in the Well? Would've loved to see that fly back when I first started.'

‘Time’s change, mate,’ Walker said. ‘She’s Townsville born, from what I understand. So the weather’s not too much of a shock. Taking a little bit to get used to the new beat. But to be honest, so am I.’

‘Like you said. Things change.’

Walker laughed. ‘Not you, but. Outlive us all.’

A silence suddenly fell between them. Not uncomfortable, but tangible, almost pressing. Eddie looked at his wristwatch. He eased himself up out of the chair, leaning on his walking stick the whole way. ‘Well, I won’t keep you. You still want me to take a look at those files?’

‘Of course, mate. Happy to take your expertise.’

A few weeks ago now, Walker had called Eddie up for a favour. Some lawyer assisting the Royal Commission wanted to talk about what had happened with McIntyre and Royce. But the files linked to the case were all over the place. Eddie would do him a solid and pull out the most relevant info from the mess, and then turn it into a brief for his meeting with the Brisbane lawyer. In all honesty, he could have done the whole thing from home, but he didn’t want to have to explain to Walker how.

‘I hope it wasn’t any trouble coming all this way,’ Walker said.

‘Not at all,’ Eddie told him. ‘Was seeing a friend in Warwick anyway. Their birthday the other day.’

Walker nodded towards the rear of the building. ‘Head outside to the tank when you’re ready then. Files are inside. If I’m on call-out when you’re done, just make sure to lock up before you go.’

‘Out in the tank? What’re you doing with all the drunks these days?’

‘Eddie, mate,’ Walker said. ‘No one left in town to bloody lock up.’

Eddie propped open the tank door with a chair. A familiar scent washed over him from out of the cement innards—sweat, vomit, cigarettes. It left his head spinning and he had to take a moment to gather himself.

There were boxes stacked in the closest cell and he dragged them out one by one, heaving them up onto the watch-desk. Inside the first was a plastic evidence bag, Wayne's final note pressed flat within. The wording was simple: *I'm sorry. I only wanted to make things better for the Well. Forgive me.*

Wayne was found two weeks after everything went down, hanging in a motel closet up North. When the Brisbane detectives finally moved in and took over the case, they declared no foul play. But Eddie couldn't fathom why a man like Wayne would make a clean getaway, only to go and top himself.

Mick was gutted when Eddie finally told him about his uncle's suicide, and it was enough to push him over the edge. He agreed to come clean about Wayne, the mill, the drug trade. But the kid never testified. An officer dropped him off at a friend's house after leaving the hospital and he was never seen again. Eddie was certain they would find him one day soon, just another bloated body in the Brisbane River.

A voice broke through his thoughts. 'Sergeant Knowles?'

Eddie turned to see a young woman standing in the doorway, her uniform collar starched, pants marked with a clean pleat. 'G'day,' she said. 'I'm Ramsay, the new constable. Heard so much about you.'

Eddie shook her hand. 'Only the good stuff, I hope.'

'Sergeant Walker says you're one of the best cops he's ever worked with, here or anywhere. Told me you never let a case lie.'

‘Well, I tried. Guess that’s all you can really do.’

Ramsay inched closer towards the watch-desk. She wiped her palms on her sleeves.

‘So this is the big case people talk about? The drug bust?’

‘It actually started with a missing girl,’ Eddie said. ‘Rose.’

The constable reached over for another box. Inside were more photographs and evidence bags. ‘So all this is from the one investigation?’

Eddie suddenly remembered all the hours, the sleepless nights. ‘You could say that. But it was never much of a case.’

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

‘It’s a long story, mate.’

‘C’mon,’ she said. ‘You know how it can be out here. Give us something exciting for once.’

Eddie closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose to relieve the growing pressure.

‘Well, the whole thing never went to court. Nearly everyone involved was either dead or missing. So the higher ups saw it as open and shut. They shifted the drug stuff to a piss-weak department at Central, and they eventually moved on to bigger things.’

‘Sounds like a heap of political bullshit,’ Ramsay said. ‘You didn’t even get to send the bastards to jail.’

Eddie looked her over. She was young, her face smooth and unblemished. How many years would they get out of her, he thought, until she couldn’t take it anymore?

Eddie put the files away. ‘Not the right people, anyhow.’

Eddie left his brief on Walker's desk, then drove through town, passing fields now overgrown, farmhouses falling apart in the hot wind.

He parked his car in the shadow of the mill stack. Through the open front he could see the floor had been stripped down, the machinery sold off by the new owners. Movement deep inside caught his eye. A wild dog sat atop a catwalk. It trotted down a stairwell towards ground level and Eddie heard the animal through the car's open window, nails clicking on exposed metal, a growl bubbling deep in its throat. The dog let out a howl and then broke into a sudden lope. Eddie watched as it disappeared into the heart of the mill, its silhouette swallowed by wayward wires and hanging plastic.

Back home in Brisbane, Eddie found a letter waiting for him under his apartment door. He folded the envelope into his shirt pocket, switched on the television, and then eased his aching body down onto the couch.

A feature about the World Expo was just wrapping up. The screen was filled with wide-angled shots of tourists walking through South Bank, children in fluoro shirts lined up for the monorail. One shot lingered on a group of Queensland policemen, laughing as they ate melting ice creams on patrol.

Eddie switched the channel over.

A door slammed in the adjacent apartment and the light fixtures in Eddie's room shook. A voice began to yell, deep and thunderous, and he turned up the television to drown out the sound. His new place was hardly perfect, but it was all he could afford on his disability pension. He was due for another operation soon, and it was one of the reasons he picked a place so close to the hospital. They had already removed a large chunk of his

intestine due to the gut shot, but the doctors were starting to think they needed to take even more, maybe set him up with a colostomy bag.

During the ad break, he got up to piss. He winced as the yellow stream sputtered into the bowl, and a pain smouldered in the soft flesh above his groin. Getting worse, he thought. Just one more thing to add to the list.

Afterwards, he switched on the lamp in his tiny bedroom, and sat down on the bed. The pinboard on the wall was revealed in the wan light. Photocopies and report carbons were pinned to the cork—all of them taken before his retirement. Eddie looked them over, as he did every night, and thought about the case. Royce had filled in most of the gaps before he quit, but there were still too many questions, too many loose threads unaccounted for.

He took the envelope from his pocket. Inside was a shipping manifest with a QBI header, and a letter handwritten in a neat cursive:

Remember what we spoke about on the phone.

Eddie had tried to contain himself when Farrow first mentioned the manifest. After the drug case was shifted to Central, the detectives attempted a raid on the dockside QBI headquarters. But someone on the inside had tipped them off. The place had been cleaned out completely by the time the coppers got there, and not a trace of the operation remained. Intel gave them the property owner's name, and it was the same identity that had registered the company. It didn't take long to figure out the man was a dummy—a false identity set up for the purchase.

Eddie had been hoping that Farrow's paperwork would maybe reveal a true identity, or a location. But now that he held it in his hands, he couldn't make heads or tails of the

information. Eddie needed another set of eyes, someone who was familiar with the case. But he couldn't force the kid to do it. He would have to let him come to it in his own time.

Eddie opened the bedside drawer and removed a leather-bound diary. Inside were lists of names and phone numbers, years of a life collated in nothing more than pen ink and aging paper. He searched through it until he found the name he was looking for.

Out in the lounge room he dialed the interstate number.

III

Royce made his way down through the darkening yard, into the wind that whipped up from the valley below. He could see Shaun up ahead and the boy was searching the verdant grass growing beyond the stone path, his jeans clinging to his thin legs, cuffs wet with dew.

Royce rubbed the crown of the boy's head as he passed.

'Hey Dad,' the boy said.

'You getting bugs for school, buddy?' Royce asked.

Shaun held an empty jar in hand. 'Only need one more. I got a ladybug today. It's inside. Wanna see?'

Before Royce could respond, the boy was off again, around the towering gum, and back up towards the house.

Anna watched them from the nearby veggie patch. 'He's been waiting to show you all day, you know.'

Royce stepped over the chicken wire fence. He kicked at a full burlap sack lying between the furrows. 'How'd we do?'

‘Pretty good,’ Anna said. ‘Got some carrots, potatoes. Enough to last us the next week or so. Your Dad caught a couple of hares this morning too. He’s thinking about making a stew.’

‘Where is the old man?’ Royce said. ‘Should probably say hello.’

Anna tugged another carrot from the soil. ‘He was out here giving me a hand, but the weather was giving his shoulder grief. I told him to head back inside. He said he had some stuff to take care of, anyhow.’

Royce had a feeling his father would be where he was most days—in the shed at the far end of the property, working on his homemade still. The man wasn’t really a big drinker anymore, but he could still brew a mix strong enough to strip the enamel from your teeth.

‘Where were you today?’ Anna asked. ‘Left when it was still dark.’

Remember your promise, Royce thought. No more lies. The two of you can’t survive it again. ‘I drove to Brisbane,’ he said. ‘Eddie wanted to talk.’

She didn’t seem surprised. ‘What about?’

‘What do you think? He gave me some papers and files to look over. He wants to try for a new angle.’

Anna shook her head. ‘I thought we were done with all of this. Why can’t people just let things lie. It’s like that bloody journalist from Four Corners all over again.’

Nearly a year ago now, Royce had received a phone call from Masters, a television journalist working on a corruption expose. He wanted to talk to Royce in person about what had happened, and why there had been no ramifications within the force. Anna had her reservations, but they both ended up meeting him in a little café just outside of Ashgrove, and Royce had told him everything—Rose, the mill, McIntyre. About how every layer of the town was rotten, and that no matter what you did, it would stain you.

Royce walked across to the other side of the patch. His daughter was sitting on a blanket, her dirty hands leaving pitch-dark prints across the plaid. She was grabbing clumps of sod from the garden bed and compacting them into a mound almost as big as herself.

He crouched down close to her. ‘Michelle, honey. What are you building there?’

She smacked the mound of sod with her hands. ‘House,’ she said, breath clouding before her. It was shaping up to be one of the coldest New South Wales winters in almost thirty years, and they were already bad enough for a Brisbane boy like Royce. He would often find himself shivering in the dark mornings, no matter how many layers of clothes and blankets he cocooned himself in. Sometimes the cold was so bad it felt like it was freezing the marrow in his bones.

He took Michelle’s tiny fingers into his. ‘Feel how cold you are, sweetheart. Let me get you some gloves from inside.’

Royce stood up and started for the house.

Anna spoke to him on his way back. ‘James, this thing with Eddie in Brisbane—’

‘I’ll tell you what I told Eddie,’ he said. ‘That part of my life is done now. We did all we could do.’

‘You promise?’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Promise.’

Later that night, he awoke suddenly from a nightmare, the sheets knotted around his ankles like a hunter’s snare.

Anna stirred in the bed beside him. ‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

Royce wiped the sweat from his face. ‘Yeah, it’s nothing.’

The wood of the house groaned around him as he walked down the dark hall, the joints and buttresses arthritic in the cold. For the most part the nightmares were gone these days, only occurring once every month or two. They still took place in the alleyway, but the girl was no longer waiting for him amid the rubbish and broken bottles. Instead he often found himself dreaming of McIntyre. He would be standing there beneath a streetlight, his uniform shirt covered in blood. Sometimes his head would be caved in. ‘Look after my girl,’ he would say. Then Royce would wake up.

Out in the backyard, he found his father standing beneath the gum, moonlight mottling through the boughs above. He had a rollie between his lips and Royce could smell how sweet the smoke was.

‘You’re kidding me,’ he said as he joined his father’s side.

Vic coughed loudly. He tugged his beanie lower, almost covering his eyes. ‘Mate, don’t knock it. Does my shoulder wonders.’

‘Where’s a grizzled old blue like you buy this kind of stuff.’

‘Blacky Bartulin sells it by the plant. More than happy to trade for some of my homebrew.’ Even in the dim light, Royce could see his father’s curved nose and shallow cheeks—the same features he saw staring back at him every time he passed a mirror. Something moved along the low hanging branch above, and Royce looked up to see a pair of glowing eyes. It was the fat mountain stray his father had taken in.

Vic reached up with his good arm and the cat rubbed her nose against his hand, purring loudly. ‘There’s a good girl.’

‘Never thought I would see you with another woman,’ Royce said.

Grass nearby rustled in the darkness. The cat leapt from the branch and chased a possum towards the wire fence, following it down along the path towards the shed.

‘Always your Mum first,’ Vic said. ‘At least she never left me.’

Royce took the joint from his father's fingers, inhaled. Smoke escaped his lungs in a sputtering cough. 'She was a good woman to put up with us.'

Vic kneaded his bad shoulder. 'Just wish I'd told her that more often when she was still here. Know what I mean?'

Royce looked up at the house behind them. 'I do.'

'Look at you,' Mrs Ziegenfusz said. 'You're almost done.'

Royce turned to see the old woman standing in the doorway to the lounge room. She was wearing yellow slacks with a purple jumper, and the contrast was almost headache inducing.

He dropped his paint roller into the tray. 'Should be finished by this afternoon. But I won't be able to start on the bedroom until tomorrow. Got to get back up the mountain before it gets dark.'

She took one of his hands into hers, passing him a small roll of cash. 'It looks wonderful,' she said in her thick German accent. 'My friend Inga needs help with her gutters. I will let her know how good you are.'

Royce slipped the money into his pocket. 'Thank you.'

'You've worked so hard. You must be hungry. Come. We can eat in the kitchen.'

Royce remembered the last time Mrs Ziegenfusz tried to feed him. He was forced to go home early, his guts churning with sauerkraut and potato cakes. 'Thank you,' he said.

'But I've got leftovers in the car. Wouldn't want them going bad.'

Returning his empty thermos to the glove box, Royce stumbled across something on the floor of the VW. It was the ratty manila folder Eddie had given him the day before, the heavy ream held together with a rubber band. He honestly hadn't given the file a thought after his meeting in Brisbane. As he told Anna yesterday evening, that part of his life was over. But now, in the cold silence of the VW, Royce couldn't help himself. He opened the file across his lap and began to sort through the documents.

Most of them were familiar to him—crime scene photographs, report carbons, written testimonies—but towards the back he found a shipping manifest he couldn't recall, QBI printed along the top. The page itself was filled mostly with typed letters and numbers, some of them crossed out by hand:

22/10/85

<i>PC001</i>	<i>CW001</i>	<i>MI001</i>
<i>PC002</i>	<i>CW002</i>	<i>MI002</i>
<i>PC003</i>	<i>CW003</i>	<i>MI003</i>
<i>PC004</i>	<i>CW004</i>	<i>MI004</i>
<i>PC005</i>	<i>CW005</i>	<i>MI005</i>
<i>PC006</i>		

Something distant flared in the dark of Royce's mind, but the thought was gone as quickly as it came.

Idling at an intersection on his way home, Royce noticed the Holden Commodore in his rear vision mirror, all four tyres missing their hubcaps. A cigarette ember flared behind the semi-tinted glass.

Royce took the main road through town, headed towards the mountain's base, and the Commodore kept pace with him at a distance. He took a sharp turn onto a street lined with identical houses, and then another right, and then a left. But still the Commodore tailed him. Driving now through a block of local shops, he steered down a delivery thoroughfare without indicating, and the vehicle continued past. With the man no longer behind him, Royce dropped the accelerator and came out the other side. He increased the distance laying between them before pulling over into an empty driveway.

He switched off the ignition and waited.

It was nothing, Royce thought. But he knew he could only tell himself that so many times before the words became hollow.

By the time he arrived home, it was growing dark on the mountainside, the ashen clouds smothering the last light of the shortening days.

He found Anna in the kitchen stirring a blackened pot on the burner, a viscous goo boiling within, dark red like clotted blood. Over the last couple of months, she had become obsessed with making preserves, conserves, jams, and their pantry was already filled with enough spreads to last a lifetime. Soon they would be running out of room, but Royce didn't have the heart to ask her to stop.

He put the money from today on the table. 'How's it going?'

'Good,' she said. 'Nearly got another batch done. I'm thinking I might take this lot down to the markets in town. Maybe earn a little extra cash.'

Royce thought about the Commodore somewhere below them, prowling through the streets. 'Yeah. Maybe,' he said. 'They might have a lot of that stuff already though.'

The record player hissed to life at the other end of the house and music slowly filled the halls. The song was one of Vic's favourites—an old jazz standard by Miles Davis. The walls shook as he danced and mugged around the lounge room, singing along to the trumpet. Michelle and Shaun giggled at his antics. Been playing that same act for years now, Royce thought.

Anna put a lid on the pot. She kissed Royce on the cheek as she passed. 'Got to let this simmer for a bit. You want to help me carry up some jars from out back?'

'Sure,' Royce said. 'Just give me a sec.'

He watched her through the kitchen window as she followed the path down past the garden and towards the shed. At the other end of the house, the song slowly faded into an up-beat swing number, and a brief moment of silence lay between the transition. In that fleeting second Royce heard the pot lid rattling on the stovetop. If Anna wasn't careful she would burn the whole batch.

He walked over to the stove and turned down the gas, numbers on the dial ranging from six to one. A memory bloomed in Royce's mind again, but this time it lingered. The numbers, he thought. It was all in the numbers.

He hurried back out to the front of the house, and began searching the manila folder inside the VW, loose carbons and photographs sliding onto the floor. Towards the bottom of the file he found what he was looking for—a photocopy of the delivery manifest he found in Warwick, the heading as he remembered it: *QBI Importers LTD CW003*. Back inside the house, Royce dropped the heavy file onto the kitchen table. He pulled his old notebook out from its hiding place above the fridge and searched for a familiar phone number.

'Armed-Hold Up,' a static-heavy voice said.

'Tyzinski. It's James Royce here.'

There was a pause. He heard distant voices down the line, laughter. 'Jesus, mate. Never thought I would hear from you again. Heard you left the force.'

Royce opened the file to the two shipping manifests. 'I've got something for you,' he said. 'Might help you with an old case you were working.'

'Just give me a sec,' Tyzinski said.

Royce heard him put the phone down. An office door slammed shut a moment later and the background chatter was suddenly gone. Tyzinski came back on the line. 'I thought you were done with all that, mate. Case closed.'

'I need you to try and check the old QBI files for me. I'm looking for a date. The twenty second of October, nineteen eighty-five. Three trucks should've been coming in around then for a port delivery. One will be from the Caleb's Well mill, but the other two I'm not sure about. If you can figure out where they were coming from, where they were going, and maybe if they had stops along the way—'

Tyzinski cut him off. 'You're saying there used to be two more.'

Royce thought about the raid on QBI. He hadn't been involved, but he had heard the finer details. 'I'm saying there still could be.'

Tyzinski sighed down the phone. 'I'll make the call now, and see if the files are still here. But if what you're saying is true, then I'll need you to come to Brisbane and lay it all out.'

Royce picked up a loose photograph from the tabletop. It showed the hatchback down in the scrub, interior stained with Rose's blood. 'I don't know about that.'

'Mate, I'll need you on this,' Tyzinski said. 'But let me find out first. I'll call you back as soon as I know the files are here, all right?'

Royce hung up the phone. He poured himself a glass of water and turned off the tap with trembling hands. From where he was standing, the sheer blackness of the sink drain

seemed endless, like a tunnel, an alley, a shaft. You don't have to do this, he thought. Just send Tyzinski the files, and let him do his job. You have a choice this time.

The phone rang on the wall behind him.

Royce followed the fence down towards the light of the shed, the barbed wire dipping over rotten roots and landslid earth. He could hear Anna in the distance slowly approaching. She was carrying the jars in an old milk-crate and the glass was softly chinking with the rhythm of her gait.

He met her halfway. 'About time,' she said. 'What took you so long?'

Royce took the crate from her hands. 'Sorry. The phone rang.'

'Well, take these inside, and then meet me back here. Got to bring up at least two more loads.'

Royce started back towards the darkened house. He stopped when he heard Anna call out from behind. 'Who was on the phone?'

'No one,' he said over his shoulder. 'Just a wrong number.'

The sun was slowly dipping behind the peaks of the range and he struggled to make her expression. 'Is everything okay?' she asked.

Royce looked down beyond the barbed-wire fence. In the last light of the day, he saw a blanket of shadow and fog swallowing the lush canopy of the valley below. When the wind picked up briefly, the tangle of leaves and branches would billow before rippling forward, and Royce thought the movement was almost like a tidal swell, a roiling wave beating at a dark shore.

'Not now,' he said. 'But it will be.'