



CITY OF SIN

CARTER THOMPSON MYSTERIES BOOK 1

SEAN O'LEARY

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So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done."

Ezekiel 9:10

CHAPTER ONE

THREE AM, KINGS CROSS, SYDNEY. CARRINGTON MOTEL. A SHABBY RUN-down dive on Darlinghurst Road. A huge man with an enormous gut was having sex with Rhia, a young female sex worker. He had black and grey hair covering his chest, belly, back, and arse. Rhia could hardly breathe, turning her face to the right to get some clean air. Trying not to look at the sweating fat bald man pumping harder and harder. Petite, small-breasted Rhia pleaded with the gods to make him come, then like a gunshot, he stopped. His whole weight fell onto her.

The air-conditioner pumped out stale, barely cold air. It was still a sticky twenty-eight degrees outside, the humidity high. She dug her fingers and hands into the fat at his hips, gulping for air as she tried to push him off. She put her right knee between his legs, forcing him out of her. She dug the fingers and hands into the fat, pushed and pushed until finally, she got a whole arm clear, then a leg and rolled out from under him. She got to her feet covered in his awful sweat, pubic hair from his body attached to her skin. She ran to the shower, turned it on, got underneath the cold water until it turned hot, stayed there until every inch of her body was clean from him.

Rhia wrapped a towel around her breasts, walked back into the main room where he lay on his belly.

Dead.

'What the fuck am I gonna do?' she whispered to herself.

Rhia thought she had come across every conceivable problem in her young, short, working life but now this. The doozy. She dressed in her red satin panties, short blue denim skirt, yellow bra, and black camisole. Put her big lace-up black boots on. Fuck a duck. I'll leave him. CCTV she thought. The Carrington doesn't have any. This is why he asked her to join him there. CCTV on the streets around might have picked up her or him coming to the motel. He came to the room first. Not seen together then. This was her second visit with him. She had said no at first because he was so gross, but he offered her double. Rhia had a kid to clothe and send to school, so she said yes. He had called her from a public phone booth. She hadn't thought they still existed. He had checked in. When she arrived, he said that he had paid for the night. He had things to do after she left. She didn't give a damn what he had to do. She wanted wham-bam-thank-you-old man. Goodbye. Now, this. Again, she thought, no CCTV at the Carrington. What did she need to do now? The Night Clerk? She had never seen him before. He could be a problem to her.

Who is the fat slob she wondered? He carried a small man bag with him. She went across to it on the chair by the bed and dug around in it. She pulled out a wad of cash in a sealed plastic sandwich bag, unzipped it, and counted it slowly. Five thousand and forty dollars. His cell phone. She didn't touch it. Left it in the bag. She checked through the bag some more. Found a wallet with six hundred in cash and two credit cards. He had the cash ready for her. Twice her usual fee. She usually got paid first but this guy was

always going to pay her. He did now. She found a piece of paper with 26784 written on it. It would be his pin she thought. Dumb fat slob kept it in his wallet. Too stupid to remember it. She was getting angry at him for fucking up her night, possibly her life.

There was a cash machine on Springfield Ave, just off Darlinghurst Road, a stone's throw away, that didn't have cameras. It was her profession to know this kind of thing. Part of the rich fucken tapestry of her life.

She put the credit cards in the pocket of her denim skirt. The cash into her black handbag. There was a driver's license in the man bag too. His name was Robert Norton. It said he lived in Penrith, in the big wide western suburbs of Sydney. He came all this way for her plus whatever he had planned for later. She found Viagra in his little bag too. He was up for a big night. A boy perhaps or another girl. Fucken degenerate. He looked truly disgusting lying there, dead rubber, spit coming out of his mouth.

She picked up his suit jacket. Started to go through it but tripped and fell onto the brown, crusty carpet, her right hand protecting her fall hit the jacket pocket. Something stuck into the palm of her hand. Flat and small like she didn't know what. She took a switchblade from her bag that she kept for protection, not use, more to scare. She carried a taser too, which she had used more than a few times. Part of the life again. She took the switchblade, cut open the material. It fell to the ground. A light blue mini-USB. Maybe 16 gigs. Tiny but with enough information to hold all the secrets of a dead man. She put it in her pocket. Stood up. It might be of use. She didn't know how but Salem would know.

She checked all around the room, making sure there was nothing left behind. Still thinking of what to do about the motel night clerk. She had never seen him before even though she had

been to the Carrington many times. But not of late, that was true. She wiped down all the surfaces, even the man bag in and out. She knew her DNA was there, but she had never been in jail. Never been charged with anything or even arrested. Sex work was legal; she didn't do hard drugs anymore. Never really did except when Salem was in jail. Ninety-five percent of her work was now online or by mobile. If she propositioned anyone on the street it was a calculated attack, well thought out. She'd been around long enough to pick the right guys but that's what they all said until it was too late. She skated around on the edge of criminality, breaking the law now, stealing money, wiping her prints away. Heading for the cash machine with his credit cards.

She opened the motel door, wiped the doorknob with her handkerchief. Wiped her brow and the back of her neck. Sydney in summer could kill you at times. She exited the room; it was the one farthest from the street. Closed the door behind her, wiped down the outside doorknob. Walked along the balcony, no lights in the other rooms. It was four am. She took the stairwell to the threadbare reception area. The night clerk had his head on the desk asleep. The fat man's death would be known when housekeeping came through in the morning.

She walked quickly to Springfield Avenue, cut down through the square to the cash machine, which was hidden from the main streetlights. It was stuck in the wall of a family convenience store shut down for the night. She put the first card in the slot, entered the PIN. It didn't work. She put the second card in the slot, entered the pin. Bingo. The fat guy had eighteen thousand dollars. The daily limit was two thousand. She withdrew it. Stuffed the cash into her bag. Walked quickly back towards Darlinghurst Road but stopped right near the end of Springfield Square, about five metres from

Darlinghurst Road. There was a grille-covered drain. She dropped the first card down it. Held onto the second card, the magic one that worked, for a bit longer. Sixteen thousand. Creased her brow, squinted her eyes, kept it.

Put it in her bag.

Friday morning ten past four am. Summertime in the city of sin. Darlinghurst Road was still lively as Rhia hit it, turned right, heading for home. Mostly cafés, bars, sex shows but con men and women too. Down-market sex workers hooked on the life. Spruikers shouting, pleading with tourists, hipsters, suburban boys and girls, mums and dads, to come into their world of sex, overpriced, watered-down alcohol and drugs. Dime bags of grass and more expensive powders and hallucinogens, all available with the right eye contact to the right person. A dangerous game when dealing with the scum of the earth.

She walked to the takeaway joint at the taxi rank. Thinking about the night clerk. Not waking him up was the right thing. Whoever Norton was, his wife, his friends, his business associates wouldn't want it known how and where he died.

She grabbed two slices of pizza. Sat down on the dirty step in front of the store, tired. She ate hungrily. I can't do this shit anymore she thought. The tipping point had been reached. But how many times had she said that to herself? She got up, continued on through the thinning crowd onto the flyover above the expressway, onto Victoria Street. She walked past closed cafés, Thai Restaurants, hotel entrances, a newsagent. Café Uno—famous for its big breakfasts, past the Green Park Hotel, turned onto Burton Street, past the park with the bandstand. Turned right into Darley Place, then cut down an old laneway, littered with used syringes, which didn't even exist on Google Maps. Through a backyard, up the

back wooden steps to the back door of the little two-bedroom apartment she shared with Salem and her kid, Molly.

She loved them more than life itself.

All the lights were off. She got a drink of water from the kitchen tap without turning the lights on, walked to her bedroom, took off all her clothes, found a clean white T-shirt hanging on a chair, got clean white knickers from a top drawer, and slipped into bed. Put her arm around the sleeping Salem, nuzzled into him, whispered, 'I'm home baby.' Thought of the extra money. She wouldn't have to work for a while. She was getting out of the whole thing. Maybe it could be a new beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

CARTER 'CASH' THOMPSON PARKED HIS HYUNDAI I30 IN AN UNDERCOVER parking lot on Ward Ave known for its drug dealers. The Hyundai was a reward from his boss in the Prosecutors Office for his years of service. He laughed whenever he thought about it. Piece of shit it was. But it wasn't a car that you looked at and said, cop. That's why he was given it. It was efficient, reliable, and had more grunt than he expected. Maybe it was growing on him. He worked on his own. That was the deal. If he needed anyone, he had a guy.

Thompson had light brown skin, was handsome, an indigenous bloke. He was tall at a touch under 195 cm with long, strong, sinewy arms. He worked out, ran, bodysurfed, swam in the pool at the Diggers Club too so he wasn't bulky more tough, wiry, and strong. He had the sweetest straight right hand when it was needed too. From when he trained at Hector's Gym in Redfern. Had a few fights too. Knock you on your back it would. He always wore black Levi's or black suit pants, a black T-shirt, or a long-sleeved black shirt in winter with a brown leather jacket, like a suit jacket in style. Strong heavy black shoes summer or winter. That way he didn't have to think about things.

He walked along Ward Ave smoking a cigarette, it had been raining, making it even steamier than the day and night before. The temperature in the mid-thirties. He cut right up Roslyn Street past the Piccolo Bar, Round Midnight. Walked across a near-empty Darlington Road into the Carrington Motel. Went up to the third floor to room 308, the last one on the floor, furthest from Darlington Road. Dropped his cigarette, crushed it under his heel before he reached the yellow and black tape. The crime scene guys were there. It was one pm. He signaled to Kholi to ask if it was OK to come in.

'Yes, we're just about done.'

Kholi was Indian. A short stocky man with thick wavy Bollywood hair. A handsome guy.

The fat man lay on an orange stretcher waiting for the body bag to be zipped up.

Thompson said, 'Is that stretcher reinforced because he is one fat motherfucker?'

Laughter from a few of the crime scene boys. Kholi offered a wry smile, and said, 'You know who he is?'

'I got told, yeah. Norton. Mr. Big at New Light Church.'

'You know how he died?'

'Steele said he fucked himself.'

'Yep, died on the job.'

'What else did you find?'

'Man-bag with no cash in the wallet, mobile phone, his license, health insurance card, nothing else. No credit cards. Small piece of paper with a number on it. His PIN I think.'

'Dumb shit,' Thompson said. 'I'll have to see how much she drew out, whoever she is right? Unless it was a boy? You're gonna tell me now, right?'

'A girl, we know that from his cock. Some light brown hair on his face too. No prints anywhere. She scratched the area around his hips, both sides, perhaps trying to get out from under him. I doubt it was passion unless he paid extra for it. Might be some skin under her fingernails, which might also have been washed down the drain under the shower she took. I'm hoping for a DNA match.'

'Me too, Mr. Kholi. What time did he die?'

'Estimate only, about three or four am.'

'Found?'

'Ten this morning by the housemaid.'

'Anything on his mobile?'

'Haven't cracked the password yet but that's not my area. Steele said his wife doesn't know it. He said he'll get the tech guys onto it.'

'Appreciate it, Mr. Kholi.'

'You want one last look at him, Thompson?'

Thompson shrugged, bent down, looked at the man. Bloated fat son of a bitch. Supposed to be the 2IC at New Light Church. Christian Evangelists. Thompson didn't care for religion. He was a cop. He had seen the evil of it. But fuckwits were drawn to New Light. Some heavyweight fuckwits too. Well-known actors, businessmen, and women, all grades of 'celebrity'. Before the most recent election, Bob Ellis, the Conservative Party Prime Minister had started off his campaign at the New Light Church on a Sunday afternoon in Bondi Junction. Hallelujah Brother. Bring the votes in.

'I'm done Mr. Kholi, this is your area. Anything more you can tell me?'

'Not really. Died on the job as I said. We'll have to test him for drugs and alcohol. No drugs in the room. The girl or woman took a shower, went through his belongings, stole the credit cards, wiped down everything else, and left.'

Thompson looked around the room. Saw the jacket on the floor.

'What's going on there?'

'Ah, yes, sorry, Cash. Important too. Somebody cut a hole in the inside pocket of the jacket. And I mean a hack job, with a pocketknife or similar.'

'Right, bit odd.'

'Bloody odd. Must have seen or felt something was in there.'

'Steele say anything about it.'

'None of my business apparently.'

'Oh.'

'But it was our girl?'

'Who else?'

'As I understand it the night clerk checked him in,' Thompson said, 'but he went home at seven am.'

'Yes. The room is yours,' Kholi said. 'I have work to do.'

Two ambulance guys came. Hefted the overweight Norton out on the stretcher and along the balcony.

Thompson stood in the middle of the room and said, 'Why did you come here? Why this girl?'

CHAPTER THREE

RHIA WOKE UP AT TEN AM. SLOWLY RAISED HER HEAD FROM THE BED. RUBBED her eyes, then put both hands back, leaned on them, getting her bearings, thinking of last night, the walk home. The fat repulsive man she had to push out of her with her knee. She thought of the cash. What she could buy with it. Fuck-a-duck. There might be trouble still. That night clerk. She had to fix that. She didn't know how much to tell Salem if anything.

She let herself fall back on the bed, closed her eyes. When she opened them again, a small face was peering down at her. She had light brown hair, wearing multi-colored pajama pants, a stained pink T-shirt with a black bear on it. She was seven, nearly eight years old. Rhia smiled back and said, 'Love you, baby.'

'Time to get up, Rhia.'

'Call me mum, baby.'

'Time to get up with me and Salem on the couch, watch movies, it's Saturday, no school, you promised you'd get up.'

'Can you get mum her cigarettes from the kitchen?'

'Get 'em yourself, 'the kid said, running back into the lounge.

Rhia sat up. Salem hadn't woken up when she snuggled into him last night. She thought there might be an old pack of ciggies in the

chest of drawers, leaned over, opened the top drawer. She dug around in the panties and socks, came up with a soft pack of Kent. A light blue lighter too. She tapped one out, lit it. There was an ashtray under the bed. She bent down, pulled it up onto her lap, lay back, lit the slightly bent cigarette. Salem put up with her smoking because he felt guilty about not working. He was on parole. He did so-called soft time in a prison farm near Wollongong. But Salem was slight in build, had no money, was easily bullied in a place like that, it wasn't a soft time for him. He appeared in the doorway with tech glasses on. The only person in the world to wear them anymore. A marketing failure of the highest order but Salem dug them still. Never took them off. He said, 'Alright, babe?'

'Yes, thank you.'

He laughed and said, 'No drama last night?'

'No. Come and hug me. Take the damn glasses off.'

He walked across to her; she lay the cigarette in the ashtray on top of the chest of drawers. They hugged tightly. She stood up. Salem cupped her right bum cheek in his hand, and said, 'I love you more than pancakes.'

She laughed, he raised his tech glasses, kissed her smoky breath. She slid her tongue into his mouth, mimicked him by grabbing his arse, they kissed for another minute or so, then he pushed her back onto the bed, and said, 'Have a shower, clean your teeth, stinky.'

'Oh, you,' she said smiling. Salem turned, walked back to be with Molly in the lounge room watching old movies on TV.

CHAPTER FOUR

THOMPSON SAT IN THE ONE ARMCHAIR IN ROOM 308 AT THE CARRINGTON. Called his boss, Gavin Steele.

'Thompson?'

'Yeah. Kholi said Norton's credit cards were stolen. You contacted the wife, yet?'

'Yes.'

'Fuck me, Steele. And?'

'She's worried about a USB her husband had on him. Said he kept it on him all the time.'

'Was there cash?'

'She thinks he was carrying three or four thousand on him. Did so all the time, apparently.'

'A nice score for our working girl. Also, his jacket was on the floor of the room. Something was cut out of the lining and yeah, I know now it was the USB.'

'Has to be.'

'She sound upset about him?'

'Embarrassed more than anything but she's serious about this USB. It contains something big, which she won't tell me about.'

'Any money withdrawn from his credit cards?'

'Still waiting on a phone call.'

'Stands to reason that the girl will withdraw or has already withdrawn the daily limit. Most cards it's two-grand, then she'll chuck it.'

'That's your job. They hired a private investigator too.'

'New Light has?'

'Yes, they won't tell me who.'

'I'm gonna go through the room. Kholi is normally impeccable whatever he does, so I don't expect to find anything, but I'll do it all the same.'

'The girl is a problem. She has to be found.'

'I know that. Ring me when the bank gets back to you. Give me the phone number of the wife.'

Steele read him the number, and said, 'Go easy on her. These people are connected to the PM.'

Thompson pressed end on his mobile.

I don't give a fuck he thought. I'm more worried about the girl.

He called Mrs. Norton,

'Hello.'

'Mrs. Norton, my name is Thompson. I work for the Prosecutors Office. I'm investigating the death of your husband.'

'You're a detective, Mr. Thompson.'

'I carry a little bit more weight than that, ma'am.'

'I see.'

'What was on the USB, Mrs. Norton? What color is it?'

'Mr. Thompson, I cannot stress to you enough the importance of retrieving that USB. It was light blue. The contents are not your business. Please don't look at the data on the USB. It is extremely private. I hope you find who killed my...'

'He wasn't killed. He had a heart attack. You, do know the circums...'

'Yes, I know. Please enough. I've had enough for one day. Find that USB, Mr. Thompson. The Church wants and needs it back.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Thank you. We can do things for you, Mr. Thompson.'

'Right,' he said.

Pressed end.

Thought, fuck you.

Thompson got up off the armchair. Angry at being spoken to like that. What is on that little light blue USB? He turned the bed upside down. Nothing. There was no wardrobe, only a metal clothes hangar. He went into the bathroom. Checked the shower. Took the top off the toilet cistern. Nothing. Ran his hands along the window ledges. Shook the curtains out. Looked in the light fittings.

Nothing.

Time to find the night clerk.

CHAPTER FIVE

THOMPSON LEFT THE MOTEL ROOM. WALKED ALONG THE BALCONY TO THE stairs then down into the reception area. A young girl with short auburn hair, sleepy brown eyes, sat at the reception desk. She smiled at him showing teeth that had been professionally whitened. She probably smoked he thought.

He said to her, 'My name is Thompson. I work for the Prosecutors Office. What's your name?'

'What?'

'What. Is. Your. Name?'

'Bella.'

'Who was working the night shift last night?'

'Wayne.'

'Wayne who?'

'I don't know his last name.'

'How long has he been working here?'

'Three weeks.'

'His name and number please.'

'I... I, um, the duty manager. He's out the back, hang on a sec.'

'Thanks.'

A guy in a white shirt, black pants and wearing thin black glasses came out with Bella from the back office.

'I'm Henry. I'm the duty manager.'

'My name is Thompson. I'm from the Prosecutors Office. I need Wayne's full name, address, and mobile number.'

'I can't give... '

'Listen, Henry. I'm a cop. What don't you understand about that?'

Henry shrugged, easily defeated, walked back into the back office, came back a few minutes later with a sheet of A4 paper with Wayne's name, address, and mobile number written on it. Handed it to Thompson who said, 'He's a new guy. Is he a casual or what?'

'He started a few weeks ago,' Henry said, 'The previous guy quit without notice. Wayne is a friend of the owner.'

'What's the owner's name?'

'Les Connor.'

'Got his details?'

Henry shrugged again, picked a pen and notepad up off the desk, wrote down the owner's name and mobile, and said, 'Anything else?'

'You know a working girl that comes in here with light brown hair? She might have been here with Norton, the big fat guy who died here last night.'

'No.'

'No. Just like that. No thought? No idea?'

'No. No one regular.'

'You sure?'

'Light brown hair, Mr. Thompson, is not a great description.'

'No, only she might be a regular.'

'I understand but no, it could be a thousand people.'

'A thousand *female* people that do *sex* work. Think hard about it, Henry, OK?'

'Yes, I understand.'

Bella gave Henry a look of compassion, which made Thompson think she was fucking him.

'You too, Bella, think hard. I'll be back. Wayne is pretty important now. Too important.'

He sat in his car, staring at the A4 sheet. Night Clerk was Wayne Hampton. He lived in Reuse Street, Leichhardt. He stabbed Wayne's mobile number into his Samsung mobile. Waited. It rang out. He tried again, same thing. Started his car, drove out of the car park onto Ward Ave, made his way to Victoria Street along to Oxford Street, turned right, said, 'Play Sade.'

The Sweetest Taboo came out of the speakers, he relaxed a bit, thought of Sade dancing in her bare feet on stage, still stunningly beautiful in her late fifties. He drove past the Lansdowne Hotel, scene of drunken crimes in his younger days, continued to Parramatta Road heading for Leichhardt.

He found Reuse Street and the apartment where Wayne lived. Leichhardt was known for its cafés, Italian population, and being lesbian-friendly. Years ago, it was tagged Dyke-Hardt. Thompson didn't know if the tag still applied, but he always got a laugh out of it. There were four apartments in the block. Wayne lived in number two.

Thompson walked up a small set of stairs to a lawn, garden beds on either side. Number two was on the left. Not a bad-looking place for a casual night clerk. He knocked on the door. Waited

fifteen seconds, knocked again. Nothing. He went to a window with a steel cage in front of it. The black curtains were pulled tight together. He went back to the door. Got his battery-powered electric master key out, drilled the lock.

Open sesame.

He entered the hallway. It stank. His handgun rested on his right hip; he unclipped the holster. Kept his hand on the gun, loose, not tight, ready to go. That smell. He entered the lounge on his right. Wayne was nailed to the far wall, naked, crucifixion style, not high up, but at eye level. Shit was running down his legs. Another wet stain of piss and whatever else on the floor underneath him. Rusty bloodstains on the instep of both feet, the palms of his hands where the nails had been hammered in. Thick fucken nails holding him against the wall. His mouth was stuffed with what looked like underwear, tied around his head with string that bit into his skin. Fuck me. He must have been drugged first, Thompson thought, partly in hope, because it would have been an awful death, and loud. There was a wound in his side to complete the Christ-like death scenario. He looked closely, there were track marks in the crook of both arms. Both fresh and old. A junkie? Given the hotshot maybe? Upstairs might have thought it was, fuck knows, renovations. He'd go and ask. He tapped numbers into his mobile. A voice answered.

'Hello.'

'Mr. Kholi, I got another one for you.'

'Where?'

He gave him the address. Kholi said, 'What is it?'

'Crucifixion, you done one of those before?'

'Many years ago, before we knew each other.'

'I haven't touched anything other than the front door getting in here. I'm hoping he was drugged beforehand. Can you bring me a crime scene suit? I want in on everything in the apartment, OK?'

'Of course, Thompson.'

'One more thing.'

'Yes.'

'It's the night porter from the Carrington.'

'Understood.'

'I'll text you the address.'

'See you soon, Thompson.'

Thompson walked outside, lit a cigarette. There was a bench on the lawn. He sat on it, drew deeply on the cigarette almost crushing it between his fingers. Fuck me. This was a message. It said, don't look into this. Forget you ever saw that fat bastard in the motel room. He smoked the cigarette slowly right down to the end. Dropped it on the lawn, stepped on it. The wound in the side. Religious message from New Light or someone who wants everyone to think it's New Light?

He got up, walked across the lawn to number one. There was a doorbell. He pushed it hard, heard a loud chime. Nothing. Pushed it, again and again, nothing. He couldn't use his tool on this one there'd be trouble. He walked up the stairs, saw the light brown curtains on the left window pulled together a fraction. He was being watched. For how long? He knocked on the door. A man in his late forties opened the door. He was semi-bald, kind of handsome in a Sean Connery-untouchables way. Black skivvy, black jeans, black desert boots. Dark brown eyes like chocolate drops. Who have we got here? Philip bloody Adams, Thompson thought, smiling a little. The man smiled, said,

'How can I help you?'

'My name is Thompson. I work for the Prosecutors Office.'

'I see.'

'What's your name?'

'Sarhan Al-Abadi.'

Arabic. He had taken him for white bread but now he looked closer, could see he had been wrong.

'Do you know Wayne Hampton?'

'Downstairs, yes. We both write. I'm a writer. Wayne, he tries to get published but a writer all the same you know. If you write then you're... '

'I get it. You hear any noise from the flat below today?'

'I thought I heard some hammering, a drill also. What's this all about?'

'I'm sorry to tell you this sir, but Wayne Hampton is dead.'

'Shit,' he said softly, 'I spoke to him a couple of days ago. He got a new job in a motel recently. Said it was a strange place would be good for... '

'I get it, sir. You're going to have to stay in your apartment until the crime scene team arrive. They'll be taking a DNA sample. Looking through your apartment. You'll be able to stay and watch them. I'll probably look through your apartment as well, shortly. You follow me?'

'*I get it*, Mr. Thompson,' he said, and a thin smile crossed Al-Abadi's lips. Thompson thought, you fucken watch it mate.

He went back downstairs. Mr. Al-Abadi, not frightened at all by a 'cop' from the Prosecutors Office or that his writer friend is dead. Not shocked. Alarmed maybe but not shocked or frightened. Maybe he's been around, seen the world. Too cocky by half or a confident man. There was a difference. Thompson would have to find out. He waited on the bench for Kholi to arrive.

Thompson walked out of the apartment on the ground floor shaking his head. Clean as a whistle unless Kholi had something. He took off the elastic shoe covers one by one. Unzipped the orange jump-suit, took the elastic hat off. Put his shoes back on. Fuck it was hot. He sat on the bench again. Snuck a look at the window upstairs. He was being watched again. He didn't like it. No one had come out of number three upstairs, most likely not home. He tapped a Marlboro Light out of the soft pack, lit it with an orange Bic lighter. Blew the smoke skyward. How could a night clerk afford a two-bedroom apartment in Leichhardt when he had only been working three weeks? How long had he lived here? Questions for the body corporate not Al-Abadi. He had to rent it not own it, surely.

He smoked sitting quite still. This is fucked. He dropped the cigarette at his feet, let it burn out. Breathed slowly in and out. He'd go back to the motel. Have another look in the room. Question the duty manager and receptionist some more. Find out when he could speak to the other staff, the housemaid who found Norton. But first another shot at the man who had been watching him.

He knocked on the door. The balding Al-Abadi opened it, said,
'They coming now?'

'No. Can I come in? I have some more questions for you.'

'Certainly.'

He stepped aside, let Thompson walk-in then said, 'Come this way,' and walked quickly along the short hallway into the lounge room on the right. The apartment, identical in layout to the apartment below, except this one had a huge expensive black leather sofa and matching armchairs whereas the night clerk probably got his stuff at AMart or Fantastic Furniture. There were

three large bookcases stuffed with books along the walls. No TV. A small sound system.

'You don't watch TV?'

'I stream on my laptop. It's enough for me. I like to sit in bed, watch it on my laptop. I don't want the obstruction of a big TV in the bedroom. The lounge is my reading room although I have a TV and DVD in my office, which is a writing room. I get them out to watch special films I can't get on streaming. Or when I simply must have the big screen. Am I boring you?'

Fuck yeah, Cash thought but said. 'No. Who is the body corporate here?'

'Andersons.'

'Can I have their number?'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'It's in my little black book in the study.'

I'll wait,' Thompson said, annoyed with Al-Abadi's casual manner.

He walked out, came back a few seconds later, read the number out to Thompson.

'Thanks. Do you know if Wayne owned or leased the apartment?'

'He was renting but he said that the owner, who also got him the job, was now including the rent in his pay, a deal the two of them had. I have no idea how much he made. He was struggling to pay the rent before that. He told me. A sweet boy but nervous.'

'He ever mention drugs to you?'

'No.'

'Did you ever think he was using?'

'I, no, maybe, yes, grass, he talked about getting stoned once.'

'Do you smoke weed, sir?'

'No comment.'

'You seem to know a lot about him. Did he confide in you?'

'Not so much. We met when we were checking our mailboxes. When I told him, I was a writer he couldn't believe it. I showed him my books, told him that I made a nice living at it...it seemed to motivate him. Like he couldn't believe you could make money from writing.'

'Were you attracted to him?'

'No.'

'Did he have any visitors?'

'I only ever saw one man, apart from the owner that is.'

'The owner is Les Connor.'

'Yes.'

'Do you rent or own, sir?'

'I rent from Mr. Connor.'

Not such a big shot thought Thompson.

'About the man that visited?'

'He was a big overweight man. I saw him four or five times.'

Thompson hesitated. Did he have a photo of Norton? No.

'Bear with me, sir. I need to make a call outside.'

Thompson rang Mrs. Norton.

'Betty Norton speaking.'

'Ma'am, it's Thompson from the Prosecutors Office again.'

'Yes, Mr. Thompson.'

'Can you send me a recent photo of your husband? I need to show it to someone to see if he can identify him. It's important. I need you to send it to my mobile number. Can you do that?'

'I'm not completely useless, Mr. Thompson. I'll send it as soon as you hang up and please get that USB back. The Church will be in your service and that is no small thing. God will thank you. We will

owe you, Mr. Thompson, and that is no small thing when the Church is involved.'

'I will, I will,' he said.

Ended the call.

God will thank me. The Church will be in my service. Was the crucifixion part of that deal, ma'am? She was implying bribery, again. Doing it with complete arrogance. No fear of retribution. How could she? She worked for God.

The photo came through. He went inside, showed it Al-Abadi, and said, 'Is this the man who used to visit Wayne?'

'Yes, that's him. I'm sure.'

Thompson sat down.

Fuck.

'Who lives in apartment three?'

'Diane, she's a property manager. Beautiful blonde woman. Works a lot. She won't be home until after six, I guarantee.'

'Her surname?'

'Ah, Keating I think, yes, that's it.'

This guy sees everything because he's at home all day working or poncing about. Thompson wanted to press him more about Norton and Les Connor, the owner. But enough for now. Let him not so much sweat but think about everything for a while. If he was involved with the Church, things would happen. The girl was the most important thing now. He didn't want to find her dead like Wayne. These Church cunts were serious people. Their fat man was dead, over. Nothing to be done for him but there was a lot more to this. Lives had been wrecked here. Les Connor was in this pile of shit too. Wayne possibly a junkie, murdered by who?

'What sort of novels do you write?'

'Crime.'

'Right, of course, you do. A Mr. Kholi and his crew will be up shortly.'

'I won't be going anywhere.'

'Good to know.'

Thompson went downstairs again as Kholi came out of Wayne's apartment, and said, 'Anything?'

'Nothing. No, not nothing some hair samples but they look like they belong to the deceased. We'll test them but it was a pro job, Cash. You've got some work to do.'

'Yeah. Can you go through the apartment upstairs? Wayne spent time there. There might be a match for him but if it's in the bedroom I want to know. You follow me.'

'I do.'

'I need *something* Mr. Kholi, oh and Norton spent time in Wayne's place. Again, you follow me. The bedsheets. The toilet. Bathroom sink. Get one of your guys to go over it again.'

'Will do. I'll call you when we're done.'

'Did you get anything off Norton's phone?'

'Again, not my area, Cash.'

'Yep, sorry. I'm spinning here; I'm searching. The wound in the side. Find out best you can what was used. The nails. Where'd they come from but I'm telling you your job, sorry.'

Thompson walked down the stairs, got in his car. Started it, popped the driver's side window down a notch or two. Lit a cigarette, and said, 'Play, *Warumpi Band*, Holy Road.'

The music started flowing through the speakers, he turned it up, drew hard on his Marlboro Light. Drove off meandering through the back streets to Parramatta Road, heading back to the Carrington. He hadn't done so bad he thought to himself, for a blackfella who

grew up in Redfern, pre-gentrification. But what of Wayne,
hammered to the wall back there, who would fight for him?

Thompson would.

CHAPTER SIX

RHIA WALKED INTO THE LOUNGE ROOM IN WHITE UNDIES, WHITE T-SHIRT, SAT on the sofa next to Molly, turned, kissed her on the cheek while hugging her hard.

'Rhia, stop it, you stink of cigarettes, please stop.'

Rhia got up, mission accomplished, smiled, and said, 'In my day we respected our parents.'

Salem and Molly laughed together, Molly said, 'No, you didn't.'

Rhia laughed with them, went into the bathroom, yelled out,

'After my shower, we're going to cut and dye my hair, OK, Molly?'

'OK, MUM.'

Rhia stripped off, got into the shower wondering what the hell she was going to tell Salem? The extra money would be great. Could she risk hitting the ATM one more time? Another two thousand. She adjusted the water, making it hot, tried to work out things in her head. How much and what to tell? Salem knew when she was lying.

She got out. Wrapped the towel around her small breasts as she had done last night. Looked at herself in the mirror. Still, look good babe she reckoned. Twenty-five, you have a nearly eight-year-old kid, a younger twenty-two-year-old boy. And you fucked a guy to

death last night. Jesus. Shit. Fuck-a-duck. She went to the bedroom, picked out clean black underwear, jeans, a clean green T-shirt with *studio life* written on it. Walked barefooted into the lounge, and said, 'Molly, here's one-hundred-dollars. I want you to buy hair dye, not blond but white, like peroxide white, it's not called that but the whitest you can get, and scissors, and this next bit is important baby, you buy the dye in one shop, the scissors in a different shop. You got me?'

'Rhia I...What the fuck?'

'Don't use that word to me.'

'I...'

'Hey, you can keep the change. I suggest you buy Salem his favorite chocolates and something for yourself if you want or save it.'

'You only gave...'

'It's enough.'

'Why do I have to go to two stores?'

'Remember, I told you about being street smart. This is one of those times. You don't ask questions you do it.'

Molly looked at Salem, he said, 'Do what she tells you. It's important or she wouldn't ask. Now go.'

'Alright, alright,' she said, stuffing the green note into her short blue overalls, pushing open the back door, leaving.

Salem said, 'What's going on Rhia?'

Salem was around 180 centimeters tall. He wore tech glasses nearly all the time. Dark shaded circular ones. He did time for tech offenses, hacking into Government sites. He was thin with collar-length blond hair, looked younger than his twenty-two years with his soft cheeks that rarely saw a razor. A dimple in his chin but he had a few lines on his forehead. Life hadn't been easy for the boy

who was an orphan, brought up in state care until he was seventeen.

'Here,' she said, handed him the light blue USB.

'Where'd you get this?'

'Found it in a motel room.'

'Lying there waiting for you.'

'Yep.'

'You told Molly to buy hair dye and scissors, to go to two different stores to do it.'

'And?'

'You're changing your look. You don't want anybody to bloody well know why. Spill it, Rhia.'

'I don't want you to get into any trouble.'

'If you're in trouble; I'm in trouble.'

'Fuck-a-duck.'

'Uh, oh.'

'You check out the USB. I'll tell you what happened, later, after you see what's on it. Deal?'

'Deal.'

Salem took his laptop off his lap, walked to a desk he had set up in the corner of the lounge room. Put headphones on, connected via Bluetooth to the laptop, played his favorite mixed tape, mostly electronic shit according to Rhia. He had been doing some small-scale hacking of late. Twenty or thirty dollars from accounts in some of the big four banks. People didn't notice it gone or if they did, shook their heads wondering what the fuck? Unsure whether to report it. Did they make a mistake themselves? No credit appears on the account, the money disappears without a trace. He was pretty genius at this stuff but got caught aiming too high. The banking tech guys are genius too. The banks recruited them out of

university in the same way the Government used to recruit spies from the elite universities in the 50s and 60s. Maybe they still did.

Some of the bank tech guys are ex-hackers. It is a constant battle to stay ahead of the game. But if a customer reports less than \$50 missing the tech guys don't get involved, it's a customer service issue. Done by the guys and gals in sector 7 G or whatever the fuck.

He put the light blue USB into the port in the laptop, waited, numbers flew all over the screen indiscriminately. Salem could see a pattern but for what he wasn't sure. Why are they like that he wondered? He started typing code at super quick speed, the numbers and letters flying around the screen. He said to Rhia above the music and TV,

'Babe, this is amazing.'

'I'm glad,' she said smiling to herself.

Her boy was lost again.

Salem continued on. Rhia watched TV, the UK version of The Chase. She liked the bald black guy, Sean. She swore to God he answered some questions deliberately wrong to make a game of it. As it finished, she looked at Salem. He kept typing away with a smile on his face that sometimes turned into a frown. Who was the fat guy that died she wondered again? Not his name. She knew that. His thing? What he did? Who? What was on that little USB? What should she tell Salem?

Molly came home, put a small cardboard box of mixed chocolates next to Salem on his desk, he said, 'Thanks, Molly, from Sam's?'

'Yes.'

'Cool, you're the best.'

'I know,' she said giggling.

'Here, Rhia,' she handed her a white plastic bag, 'the scissors I got from the Asian convenience store and the dye from the chemist.'

'Good girl. You want to help me, darling?'

'Yes, please.'

'Come on then, let's go to the bathroom. Grab a chair from the kitchen table, a tablecloth to wrap around me.'

'This I'll be fun,' Molly said.

'Yes, it will, my darling girl.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

'YOU REALLY DON'T KNOW SHIT ABOUT ANYTHING DO YOU, MISS BOIS. GOOD luck inside.'

'You prick. I...' Cash called the Carrington while he was driving to make sure Henry, the duty manager, stayed where he was, Bella too. At the car park on Ward Ave, he sat in the Hyundai, called Les Connor, the owner of the Carrington but it went to voicemail again. Thompson left a message.

'This is Carter Thompson. I am an investigator with the Prosecutors Office, next time I call you fucken answer your mobile. A man died in your motel last night. A man you know with a sex worker you may have provided for him. Remember, you fucken answer my calls.'

He lit a cigarette as he got out of the car. Walked the familiar streets toward the Carrington. Kings Cross could be awful in the daytime. Shabby, dirty, without even a hint of false glamour. The sleaze was more down-market than ever. It wasn't always that way: it used to be full of bohemians; theatre and film people; writers gravitated there but the drugs and sleaze took over and when they tried to clean it up, they took away most of its character. A couple of bored spruikers sat on stools outside a sex show club, talked,

smoked. A few junkie sex workers plied their trade, desperate for a John, which would then pay for the fix.

He entered the Carrington. Henry and Bella stood together at the front desk. Thompson nodded at them, Henry said, 'Shall we go out the back?'

Lifted a wooden panel at the end of the desk, Thompson walked through the gap, followed the two of them out to the back office. They all sat on black roller chairs in the small, cramped space. Thompson said, 'The first thing that I have to tell you both is that Wayne is dead. I can't comment any further on this. But you needed to know. You also need to know his death and the death of the man last night cannot be talked about. You cannot tell anyone. You can't talk about it with the owner, no one.'

Bella was shocked. Her mouth started twitching, she didn't cry though. She sat straight up like she was in a school photo but not smiling only a look of dread. Henry nodded, grimaced, shook his head. Thompson said, 'We move on. A girl or an older woman with light brown hair was in room 308 when the man died last night. She's most probably a working girl, a sex worker, maybe not from the street but she's probably been here before.'

Neither Henry nor Bella spoke.

Thompson said, 'Henry, you have a policy for this, right?'

'There's nothing written down,' he says, 'but yeah, we get to know some of them. But a lot of the times the guest books the room, the girl goes straight up without talking or checking with us. We might be out the back, we might recognize them and let them go.'

'A working girl with light brown hair, she probably saw the same guy before. Ring any bells?' Both of them shook their heads. Thompson said, 'Come on, guys.'

Henry grew a pair, and said, 'That could be anyone.'

'I might have CCTV footage tomorrow morning. But I need to know. Did you two know the man who died? Had he been here before?'

'I don't know him,' Bella said. 'I didn't see him check-in.'

'Henry?'

'I know he's from the Church.'

'How do you know he's from New Light Church?'

'Last time he came here, the owner called ahead, and said to give him a key, no signing in, no names, nothing in the computer system. Only a room key. Said to use the name David Jones for identification only, make the room out-of-order in the computer system.'

Thompson laughed, 'Old David Jones gets around.'

Henry was able to manage a smile too.

Thompson asked, 'Does the owner do this a lot? The David Jones thing?'

'Maybe ten or twelve times a month.'

'Underage boys and girls?'

'Maybe,' Henry said, 'it's pretty hard to tell but some would be borderline at best. I think that's why they did it. Old enough to be legal but looking much younger.'

'That's quite an observation, Henry. I don't know but maybe I can put a stop to all this shit,' Thompson said.

'I've been here a year but the guy who I took over from said they had been coming here for years.'

'Men and women screwing boys and girls.'

'Yes.'

'Women too?'

'Yes.'

Thompson was done. He needed a photo of the girl Norton had been with or a still shot from CCTV. He wondered if Henry and Bella and whoever else worked there would say these things in court, make statements. The New Light Church private investigator would get to them soon.'

'I'll be back, tomorrow. I need you to think about connections between the owner and these men. How we can prove they were here. Credit cards receipts, things like that.'

'Alright, I'll look,' Henry said. Bella nodded, put her head on Henry's shoulder.

'One more thing. Did Wayne ever come here before he started work?'

Both shook their heads. Bella started to cry.

Thompson thanked them and left. Steele rang him as he walked to Andiamo Café a few hundred meters away on Victoria Street.

'One credit card was used at Oz bank ATM Springfield Avenue at four AM. Two-thousand withdrawn. Camera not working in the ATM. Hasn't worked for months, no one bothered to fix it.'

'Fucken banks. OK, I suggest leaving the account open. Our girl might go back for one more slice of cherry pie.'

'Fine. I'll tell the bank.'

'The other card?'

'Nothing.'

'I can't get this prick Les Connor, who owns the Carrington to answer my calls. You got an address for him.'

'I'll get it.'

'Guy dies in his motel. A fellow Churchgoer and he goes all quiet and shy, fucken prick. It seems like the motel was used all the time for sexual assignations, some legal some not according to the duty

manager. No computer records all the men signed in as *David Jones*, simply as a way of identifying them. Some women too.'

'That's good work, Thompson.'

'I think I got the duty manager onside. He's going to look for credit card receipts and so on, but I'm worried the Church PI might get to him and the other workers, you know, along the lines of you want to keep your job, you know what happened to Wayne. It could get scary for them.'

'You need to find the girl, Thompson.'

'You said I could see the CCTV tomorrow?'

'Yes, organized.'

The call ended. Thompson walked across the flyover as Rhia had done in the early hours of the morning. He stopped at Andiamo; the café had been there forever. Ordered a strong flat white, spaghetti carbonara. The girl who served him was beautiful, slim, Asian, cat's eyes. No smile.

A different waiter brought the spaghetti. A shambolic-looking character in baggy black suit pants, a big billowing white shirt, viva Zapata mustache but when he smiled his whole face came alive, made Thompson feel better about the world.

The shambolic one said, 'Enjoy coffee and good food. It's a beautiful day, yes?'

'Yes. Maybe a little hot.'

'A breeze is coming,' the man said, it seemed to cool even as he said it.

Thompson sipped the coffee. It was nearly five pm now. Tomorrow he would see the CCTV. Steele had organized it but for unknown reasons, he couldn't get in today. He could wait. Thompson played the long game better than most. He lit a cigarette as the girl with cat's eyes came back for the empty bowl.

He smiled at her. She looked him over, smiled back. She left again. He thought she had a great walk. Straight-backed, strong.

He took a final drag on another cigarette, pressed it into the ashtray.

The Asian girl came back, reached for the coffee cup, he said, 'What's your name?'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

She laughed and said, 'Aimee, I'm Chinese, in case you were going to ask, I mean my parents are, isn't that what you were going to ask. I grew up in Cabramatta.'

'I bet you get sick of that explanation.'

'Ha-ha, yes, I do. What's your name?'

'Carter Thompson.'

'You're a cop.'

'Does it matter?'

She ignored him, and said, 'Anything else, another coffee?'

'No.' He handed her his card. A simple white card with his name, the word, Investigator, a mobile number.

She smiled again, and said, 'Maybe.'

'Maybe's not no. I'll be back.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

SALEM PUSHED THE CHAIR BACK FROM THE DESK. THE WHEELS ROLLED ACROSS the wooden floor. He shook his head, ran his hands through his blond hair. He knew there were account numbers and a large number, possibly hundreds, maybe thousands of more images and video involved but he couldn't open the files, couldn't break the codes. Rhia sat on a ratty old but much-loved sofa with her head in her hands. Molly was in her room with headphones on, adding songs to playlists on Spotify.

Salem went to Rhia, put his arms around her. She was crying softly, he kissed her cheeks one at a time, and said, 'What happened?'

She told him everything, the whole sad story. Then got up, fetched the cash from her room. Told him about the credit cards. But lied, telling him she had thrown both cards away.

He said, 'It's over. You can't do it anymore. The money can be a start to a new life. I hated it before, hated that you had to do it. I can work. I can get a job as a dishwasher or waiter. You can work in a bar or a store, a supermarket. I can put together false CVs. The money won't be as good but you...'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'Yes. I'm done. I can't do it anymore, not after that.'

They sat in silence. Rhia had never had a proper job. Her mum died when she was seventeen when Molly was two years old. Rhia was only out of school for eight months. Her mother had been a cleaner, there was no inheritance. Molly's father had left town the moment he heard about the pregnancy, but Rhia didn't care about that. She had made a mistake with him. He was dull, a stoner. But when she nursed Molly for the first time she was truly in love. She had a close friend, Andy, a drug user, another high school dropout who was already doing sex work around Kings Cross and the notorious wall in Darlinghurst. Rhia started sex work too, winging it.

Rhia and Molly had to move out of the two-bedroom flat they had lived in with Rhia's mother in Darlinghurst. Andy, Rhia, and little Molly moved into a one-bedroom flat in Potts Point. They were friends, not lovers. He was gay. They had a view of the harbor if you stood on the toilet seat and not much else. One worked; one looked after Molly. But Andy started using heavily. Rhia never did, not heroin. Andy wasn't reliable anymore. Rhia stayed home. Andy disappeared one day, never came back. Rhia didn't report it to the police. She went to Centrelink, applied for welfare, got it. But she couldn't go out anywhere without Molly; couldn't do that cash-in-hand sex work. But she had Molly and that was enough. This lasted three years.

When she was twenty, she met Salem when she was taking Molly for a stroll in the pram along Macleay Street, headed for home. He asked her for a light and then if she wanted a coffee? He was bright, funny, and cheeky. He had a friend, Teresa, who was happy to look after Molly a few nights a week while Molly and Salem lived a wild life around the Cross and up on Oxford Street,

Darlinghurst. Rhia lived her wild teenage-like years later than her peers. It was a joyous time for both of them. Rhia enjoyed sex for the first time in her life as Salem was a gentle and generous lover. Salem didn't take drugs, Rhia did a little pot and speed, an acid trip here or there. They went to clubs and dance parties in big warehouses.

Salem moved into the one-bedroom in Potts Point with them. His friend moved away so they settled a bit. Salem always had money from his hacking but then he got caught. Did eighteen months in jail, broke Rhia's heart. She started working again during the day, hiring a babysitter for Molly. She was making nice money, still getting welfare, not taking drugs. She had regulars. She didn't save much money. Molly needed clothes and shoes all the time and school was coming too. The rent took a big chunk, she liked buying clothes for herself. She took a lot of speed to keep going.

Salem got out. He hated what she was doing but he was a wreck from jail, his nerves shot. It would take a lot of time for him to regain them. He took prescription meds for anxiety, had some PTSD issues. He never went out outside, but it was a godsend in a way because he looked after Molly. No babysitting fees, she could work at night for better money. She advertised in the Wentworth Courier both online and in print, changing her name and mobile all the time. The regulars continued but she brushed a lot of them, they made her sick with their talk of saving her, making her their own. She couldn't believe how stupid they were.

It was work. She was popular, satisfied the men. It was dangerous too, fuck yeah. She had a knife pulled on her twice, had to MACE the guys, run out of the motel. She often had to skip out of motels and low-down dives, but they moved to the two-bedroom in Darlinghurst. Molly had her own room. Salem was making small-

change, hacking accounts again. He didn't tell Rhia, but it all helped. Salem feared the work was destroying Rhia and he was right. Now, it was over. They would try and live a normal life; earn money the same way other people did. Unskilled people in unskilled jobs.

What they didn't understand, even Rhia with her street smarts, was someone was going to be coming for them. Someone hired by New Light Church. Thompson was looking for Rhia too. She didn't kill anyone, but she left the scene. Stole the credit cards. He could make her answer for these things but right now he feared for her life. She might know something, and she had that USB.

The death of Norton had so far been kept out of the media. Wayne Hampton's murder was not reported either, not yet. Steele had found out he was a nobody with no family. An orphan like Salem. Steele had a special ambulance crew to call for such jobs. No leaks. Al-Abadi was told not to say anything especially not to the property manager who lived next door to him. The other ground floor flat was vacant.

Only Thompson cared.

And it was his job to care.

CHAPTER NINE

LES CONNOR, OWNER OF THE CARRINGTON MOTEL, MEMBER OF NEW LIGHT Church. Owned another small motel on Parramatta Road between Auburn and Merrylands that serviced traveling salesman (yes, still in existence), families stopping over who chose the wrong place to stop, low rent criminals, low-level dealers on long term rates scrounging around to make the rent each week. Men and women checking in for a night or an afternoon of sexual assignation or longer one-night stands after meeting in beer barns or crappy, down-market nightclubs that were located on the once log-jammed metropolitan road. It was still chockers with cars at times but there were freeways and tollways if you wanted to bypass it now. Part of Sydney's rich tapestry.

Connor looked at his phone as it rang out. Thompson again, this cunt was going to be trouble for all of them. A loose cannon he was told by criminal friends and the Church who greased his palms for favors and rooms. Connor was one of those Churchgoers who believed God would forgive all of his sins as long as he protected the Church and its members and attended Church on Sunday mornings. He also owned a shooting gallery/peep show in Kings Cross.

Connor rang Sally Bois, the private investigator the Church had hired to find the girl who was in the motel and to get the USB back. She answered,

'Yes.'

'This is Les Connor. I was told to call you if Thompson got in touch with me again. He's been ringing, threatening me.'

'Les, is it?'

'Yes.'

'This is simple, Les. Ring him back. You don't know anything, do you? You were home in bed with your wife.'

Connor smiled, 'Yes, I was.'

'Then there's no problem. Don't get weak on me, Les. Don't be a soft cock. Be a man. You are a man, right?'

'Yeah, uh, er, yes. I was told...'

'Just do what I told you. You don't know anything. Think you can remember that?'

She ended the call.

Les Connor felt better. He didn't know anything. Simple. That Sally Bois though, what a ball breaker.

Thompson was sitting on his sofa, a light brown kind of velvet thing, his mobile went off. He didn't recognize the number but answered anyway.

'Thompson.'

'I heard they call you Cash.'

A female voice he didn't know.

'Some do.'

'My name is Sally Bois. New Light Church hired me to look into the death of Mr. Norton.'

'Did he die? I didn't see anything about it on the news.'

'You're a funny guy, Thompson.'

'I heard that too.'

'I understand you're going to view the CCTV footage from last night on Darlington Road around the time of his death.'

'No.'

'We both know that you *are*. I want to sit in on it.'

'No can do.'

'Why not?'

'Need to be an investigator from the Prosecutors Office to do that.'

'I thought we could help each other.'

'I work alone, that's the way it is, Miss Bois.'

'Sally.'

'Whatever.'

'Can we meet?'

'No.'

'I think your boss, Mr. Steele is going to get an irate call shortly.'

'That's his problem.'

Thompson knew the council office was closed now. That there was no way Sally Bois could see the footage before him. He would get there at nine am tomorrow.

'Are you some kind of asshole or something?'

'Nice talking to you Miss Bois,' he said and ended the call.

Thompson lit a cigarette. He didn't give her anything. Wasn't going to help the bitch. She might have nailed Wayne to the fucken wall.

His mobile went off again. Another number he didn't know.

'Hello.'

'Carter?'

'Yeah.'

'This is Aimee, from the café.'

'Oh, hi. I didn't think you'd call.'

'I heard they call you Cash.'

'Some do. Why?'

'A cop with a reputation. How could I resist?'

'A lot of people do. Resist, I mean.'

'You wanna pick me up after work?'

'Yeah, I do.'

'Come about ten to eleven.'

'Anything else?'

'Treat me good.'

'See you at eleven.'

The call ended and his mobile rang straight away again.

'Thompson.'

'This is Newman from Tech.'

'What's on the phone?'

'Some rank photos of the fat guy with young boys and girls. Let's say if they're legal it's barely. His calls are encrypted but we'll get them soon as we can.'

'Nothing illegal.'

'It's impossible to tell if they're old enough for consenting sex. As I said, they're barely legal. They look young. There's a type I guess, young and skinny, both male and female. Some kinky stuff. The fat guy getting pegged by a young girl, not pleasant.'

'Pegged?'

'You'll understand when you see it.'

'Can you send the photos?'

'Doing it now. See ya.'

The photos came through quickly. In one of them, Norton was being sodomized by a skinny blonde girl wearing a large, black strap-on dildo. He now knew, thanks to Newman, the porno word for it was pegging. The other photos showed Norton nude or in various stages of undress with yes, young skinny boys and girls. One showed a young girl with a shaved head and rat's tails riding on top of the obese man. Her hair was black, not light brown. Newman was right, almost impossible to tell from the photos how old they were. He was dead too, so, only the boys and girls mattered now but how the hell would he find them? It all hinged on the girl who skipped out last night.

He was going to get serious with that prick Les Connor too.

CHAPTER TEN

SALLY BOIS WAS AN EX-PRIVATE SCHOOLGIRL, BORN IN ROSE BAY HOSPITAL TO Nicola and Harry Bois. Both parents died in a car accident on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst one morning at three AM when she was nineteen. Harry was pissed out of his mind, ran into a light post doing one-twenty K, and if you know Oxford Street in that area the insanity of what he did only gets worse. Being alone in the world was something she had in common with Salem and Wayne, only they had been wards of the state.

Sally had inherited the Rose Bay Mansion, a boat, which she sold immediately, about a million-five-hundred thousand in cash, a Palm Beach holiday house. She sold the Rose Bay mansion. Moved into a nice new architect-designed three-bedroom home in North Bondi with a lap pool, stunning views of the ocean, and cliffs. She had a black belt in a street fighting influenced mixed martial art. She ran, did weights daily, swam at the Icebergs as well as her lap pool, surfed when she could. She was strong, hard, feared nothing and no one.

She was twenty-nine, never had a long-term boyfriend, picked up guys in bars and clubs, didn't use Tinder, there was a trail. She had one close friend in Missy Bourke. They held hands together in

primary school, stayed close ever since. Missy was also not married but had a long-term lover, Michael Tanaka, a Japanese-Australian guy who was a renowned heart surgeon and former rugby union player.

Tanaka was a celebrity doctor, commonly appearing on the morning show on Seven with Kylie and Larry and the other two, almost identical shows on rival stations. He spruiked for New Light Church, as he credited them with turning his wild ways around. Like Tom Cruise Spruiked Scientology. But Tanaka had friends in shall we say less attractive businesses. He was mates with Lebanese Billy Hassan, a Kings Cross identity, drug dealer, protection racketeer, and stand over man. Also, Mario 'Rocky' Bartolini who did workplace relations, debt collecting, and kicking the shit out of people for a price. The two girls didn't mind mixing it with the rough trade.

Sally did the dirty work for the New Light Church. Knew all the dirty little secrets, had access to Tom Abbott, head of and the main public face for New Light. He still did the preaching every Sunday at the Church in Bondi Junction. Before the soft rock party took over.

Sally rang Abbott's doorbell at the large terrace house he owned on Queen St in Paddington. He answered the door in black suit pants, a white shirt, midnight blue tie, the top button done up on the shirt, the tie fastened tight. He was a small muscular man; you could see his biceps straining at the shirt. He held himself tall and straight like a big man. Wasn't happy that Bois was there at that hour. He was an early to bed early to rise guy. Had grey hair, a perfectly trimmed greying beard. He was fifty-eight years old.

Sally Bois was tall and strongly built but she hid it under a baggy green T-shirt and light blue Adidas track top. She had short blonde hair in a crew cut like someone in the American armed forces. Thick, dark eyebrows above dark brown eyes, cheekbones a model

would kill for. Her strong thighs pressed against the black CK stretch jeans. Doc Martins on her feet. Abbott stepped aside, and said, 'Come in, Sally.'

She entered and he closed the door behind her. She waited behind him. He turned, walked past her, she followed him down the hall, they turned into the library. She had been there more than a few times to get things straight in her head. He shut the door behind them, and said, 'My wife is a light sleeper. I don't think she needs to hear this.'

Bois stood straight. Abbott stood opposite her, taut and strong, wound up tight like he might explode any second. This was deliberate. People were scared of him. He had the manner of a strict 1950's Catholic priest who whipped young boys into line.

Sally said, 'Thompson won't let me in on the CCTV tapes.'

'What about after he's seen them?

'We didn't get that far. He's a prick.'

'He baited you; you lost your cool.'

'Yes.'

'What d'you want, Sally? Why are you here?'

'I need to see those tapes if you want me to do a proper job and clean this little shit-box incident up. I need to find this girl and shut her up.'

'Like you shut young Wayne up?'

'You said to send a message.'

'Our Lord guided me.'

'We couldn't have him talking to anybody.'

'I know what you did to the boy. Steele's crew does have a leak but was it necessary. The pain and...'

'I drugged him first.'

'I see but you want it on the news, don't you? You want it out there as a warning, yes?'

'I'm doing what you pay me to do.'

'I'll leak the manner of his death to my media connections. Perhaps the girl who was with Norton when he died will see it and that might scare her away for good.'

'We need the USB first.'

'Well, Sally, fucken clean it up, that's what I pay you for, right? That's what you said to me, you insolent girl.' He smiled.

She bowed her head, and said, 'I'm sorry.'

'I want you to go to the motel as soon as you leave here. Try and get there right at ten PM. It's shift change over time for the receptionists. The duty manager will be there too. I have some envelopes for them.'

He went to a roller desk, opened it, picked up four envelopes.

'There are three receptionists and the duty manager. Two thousand each and you scare the hell out of them. Tell them to watch the news, to see what happened to Wayne. The housemaid has already resigned. She's young, single, moving interstate to a better job.'

'I'll do as you say.'

'And don't ever give me fucken orders again, you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You must come over for dinner one night, you and your latest man.'

She blushed bright red, and said again, 'Yes, sir.'

He made her feel like a child. She liked it.

'I'll get you in to see those tapes, tomorrow.'

She nodded.

'Good girl, now get to the motel then go home to sleep. Don't worry about anything. God is our guide.'

Abbott took her to the door, and said, 'Don't lose your cool, Sally. Thompson is smart, experienced, and does not scare easily. But I know some of his history. He has a wife and daughter. He can be got at.'

Bois smiled, 'Thank you, sir.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THOMPSON WAITED OUT THE FRONT OF THE CAFÉ WEARING BLACK JEANS, A black short-sleeved button-up shirt. Aimee was working but saw him, nodded her head, smiled. He smiled back, sat on the small brick fence, lit a cigarette. He had half-finished it when she came out. She said, 'Got a spare one?'

He took the packet from his front pocket. Shook out a Marlboro Light, she took it, he lit it for her with a purple Bic lighter.

'Where to?' she asked him.

'I thought the Goldfish Bowl, then a surprise.'

'I like surprises.'

They walked, not speaking, across the flyover to Kings Cross. The Goldfish Bowl was the local name given to the front bar at The Crest Hotel. It sat in the triangle where Darlinghurst Road crossed Victoria Street and split across each other. The front bar was three-sixty-degrees glass windows hence the nickname. They sat on stools with rips in the orange cushions, facing Darlinghurst Road. It was early for The Cross but as it was Friday night there was plenty of foot traffic. Boys and girls from the suburbs, backpackers, middle-aged punters out after a meal, and the usual detritus of life that The Cross attracted. Plus, the permanent residents, the working

boys, girls, men, and women. Life on the street. Thompson sipped a Corona, Aimee a gin and lemon squash.

She said, 'You trying to impress me? Sparing no expense.'

'It's good. People watching.'

'Yes, it's perfect for that.'

A beat.

'You're Aboriginal, aren't you?' she asked.

'You're blunt.'

'It has been mentioned to me before,' she said smiling.

'I'm a Gadigal Man. Part of the Eora Nation. I don't get too worked up about it unless someone pisses me off, which has happened a few times.'

'Like racist stuff?'

'Yeah, mainly ignorance but some malicious cunts out there too.'

She didn't know what to say. He's powerful, is what she thought. She tried to lighten it up and said, 'I don't think anyone ever asked me out that quickly before?'

'Is that why you came?'

'Yeah, partly and you're a cop. It was new.'

'I'm not a regular cop. I do the same thing, but my boss gives me a pretty free rein which he rarely pulls on. I work for the Prosecutors Office, it's a new thing about five years old.'

'Sounds like you like it.'

'I get away with shit the cops wouldn't.'

She laughs, 'You're pretty confident.'

'Not really. I don't usually hand my card out like that.'

'Why do they call you Cash?'

'I don't know. Your boss told you, right?'

'Yeah.'

'I might have to straighten him out.'

'Oh no don't do...oh you're making fun of me.'

'It's a nickname. It's fine. My dad wanted to call me Johnny, after Johnny Cash but my mum wouldn't have it. They compromised, called me Carter after June Carter his wife. Then my dad started calling me Cash as a nickname. It stuck. Even at the academy, they found out and one guy said I was Cash because I walked the line. That stuck too.'

'Cool story. Where'd you grow up?'

'Grew up in Redfern before it became gentrified, not all of it, mind. Still, some rough kinds of dangerous people there that I still know. But a lot of people are family too. Good people.'

'Did you like it?'

'I wanted to get out as soon as I could. My dad died when I was seventeen, mum a few years after but I had the house. It was a small commission house. I rented out the second bedroom for a while. I went to UTS to study social work, did some computer stuff too, then rented the whole house out to some cousins of mine. I wanted some experiences. I lived in a few shared houses around Glebe. Lived with blackfellas and whitefellas, activists, film freaks, music buffs, drug takers, dancers, trippers, one evil fucker I had to take care of. Met my wife. Went to the academy, became a cop. I liked it. Was good at it. Am good at it.'

She nodded slowly, smiling, he was an interesting cat.

'That enough information for now?'

She laughed, turned to face him, and said, 'Yeah, that's plenty.'

They drank in silence. Thompson offered her another cigarette, she took it, they smoked and drank a bit more. She said, 'You said you met your wife'

Yep, not together anymore.'

'Good to know.'

'I'm separated, neither of us can be bothered getting a divorce. I pay the bills I'm supposed to pay. I see my daughter as often as I can. I love her. We don't hate each other. My ex I mean.'

'How long have you been separated?'

'Five years. She didn't want me to take this job.'

'And your daughter?'

'She's seventeen. Only starting to go out now, she was or is a geek but a beautiful one. She doesn't take drugs or get wild. Not yet, anyhow.'

'She sounds nice. You know that geeks rule the world, don't you?'

"I did code myself. Retrained with some younger cops through the IT guys in the police force, still, keep up with it.'

'I'm impressed.'

'And you?'

'I'm at the café and I study writing at UTS.'

'Full-time or part-time?'

'Both part-time.'

"You published anything?'

'Yeah,' she smiles, starts to laugh a little bit, 'I think it's five stories. I'm working on a collection.'

'Can I read them sometime?'

'Sure.'

They talked, drank, smoked. An hour went by, two hours.

'Ready to move on,' Thompson asked.

'Yes, where? What's the big surprise?'

They walked along Darlinghurst Rd. She hooked her arm around his forearm. They moved in and out of people coming at them from all angles. She liked it. It was normal for Thompson. They crossed the road, walked by the ice-cream parlor, he led her down Roslyn

Street for twenty meters. Then slowed, and said, 'Here, up the stairs.'

There was a staircase at the entrance to a club, she smiled, they went up the wooden steps. She didn't see a sign naming the place.

'What is this place?'

'Round Midnight.'

They reached the top of the stairs, walked through a red velvet curtain into a large rectangular room. A band on stage doing some 'Bird' Parker song. They found a booth, slipped in.

Thompson said, 'Surprise.'

'I didn't figure you for a jazz guy, more like Cold Chisel or American rock, The Eagles or something,' and she started laughing at the look of horror on his face. 'It's OK, I know you're not now.'

'Jazz is king.'

She laughed.

They didn't dance. They drank a lot. Talked a lot. Thompson chain-smoked, mentioned songs he knew. The band played on. A black female singer stepped up from nowhere, sang, *Let's Get Lost*. Thompson couldn't take his eyes off her. She was something else.

The singer left as mysteriously as she had arrived. He said to Aimee,

'Have you heard of Chet Baker?'

'I don't know, maybe. Something about the name is familiar.'

'He was a jazz player, a trumpet player mainly famous in the 1950s. That song the black girl sang was a trademark of his. A farm boy who made it big in New York. His style was called *cool jazz*. He got addicted to heroin. Not many white boys get taken seriously but Chet is still respected today.'

'Chet Baker is a cool name.'

'Yeah, he was a good-looking guy too until the heroin ruined his features, he lost some teeth too, but it all added to his image.'

'I bet.'

'There's a film called *The Fine Young Cannibals*. It's based on his life.'

'Like the band?'

'Yeah.'

The band played the Miles Davis classic *So What*. Thompson put his hand in the small of Aimee's back, she turned to face him, he turned, kissed her. She kissed him back softly, then hard and needy for a minute or so. The band stopped, Thompson said, 'You want to get out of here?'

'Yeah, sure.'

They walked to Thompson's car. Aimee was drunk, laughing and talking. Thompson liked her more and more as each second and minute went by. He didn't feel drunk. He started the car, drove out of the car park. Aimee with her hand on his thigh stared at him. He drove towards Bondi sat on the speed limit. Increased his speed down Old South Head, slowing to turn right into O'Brien Street when a car sped through the red light, whacking hard into the back of the Hyundai at rapid speed. The Hyundai span a full three-sixty. Thompson didn't fight it, didn't turn the wheel against the flow, but put his arm across Aimee for her protection. The car span in a one-eighty skewed sideways, the back bumper bar nicking a lamppost, that's when Thompson turned the wheel, took back control of the car, drove hard away from the curb bringing the Hyundai to a stop about thirty meters from the lamppost. He turned the engine off. Sat still.

He said, 'Fuck me.' Turned to Aimee, and said, 'You, ok?'

'I think so. Wow, you um...'

'It's cool. I've been in worse. We're fine, aren't we?'

She looked around, shook her head, smiled at his casualness, and said, 'Yeah, we are. Did you see her though?'

'Huh.'

'I saw red hair, long red hair. A woman. She sped off like nothing happened, like...'

'Like it was planned.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

SALLY BOIS WENT TO THE CARRINGTON MOTEL. MADE SURE THE STAFF WAS scared. She mentioned how Wayne had died. Someone was out to *eliminate* the truth she said. The message was clear. She would go back in the morning to speak to the fourth receptionist, give her the envelope, spell out the method of Wayne's death again, imply anything could happen. The housemaid was a problem even though she was gone. She wondered if Abbott had made a mistake not letting her deal with it her way. The housemaid had seen Norton dead on the bed. Could testify about it. The whole shebang could unravel. The girl. The hooker. She was the key. She had the USB. Who else? The leak from the crime scene team said the jacket had been cut open. Norton's wife had told Abbott he kept it on him at all times.

The fat prick.

She wasn't going home to bed. She went to her car, put on a red, long-haired Cleopatra style wig with a fierce fringe, walked around to Kellet Street, to the Users Club. The crowd was mostly early twenties men and women, gay, straight, trans whatever. All were welcome. Bois entered the club. They put on little sex shows, staged bondage, and the like, with pumping bass music delivered

by a towering, stunning, black Somali girl at the decks in the DJ booth.

Bois walked across the dance floor towards the unisex toilets. An older guy stared at her. She took note. He looked like early forties, confident, tanned, danced with a pretty, fresh-faced, slightly chubby blonde. No competition. Bois went to a cubicle, put the toilet seat down, took a packet of wipes from her leather jacket, wiped down the seat then dried it with a handkerchief. She took a little plastic baggy filled with white powder from her jeans pocket. Laid out three lines. Snorted them fast, one after the other. Her forehead beaded with sweat as she re-entered the main room, her head pounding with the driving bass music and the delivery of the high to her brain. She danced close to the older man, his eyes followed her, this was going to be a quick kill. She danced closer and closer to him, as the young blonde girl danced away into the crowd.

Bois grabbed the older man by his hips, thrust her hips forward up against him. He pushed back into her. She moved her bum slowly in and out like she was pumping him, and he went with it.

'You like that?' she asked.

She moved around in front of him now. He was totally captivated. She put her hands on his shoulders, they bumped and ground into each other, she pulled him in close, and said, 'You're beautiful.'

He laughed, and said, 'You're crazy.'

'I am,' she said, kissed him on the mouth. He reached for her strongly, kissed her back, pushed his semi-hard cock against her.

'I like that,' she said but stopped kissing him, moved away from him, danced through the crowd. He followed her, grabbed her hips as she had done to him. She leaned back, and said, 'Let's get out of here.'

'You, sure?'

'I'm sure. My car is close by.'

She parked in the underground car park of her North Bondi pad, opened a door from the garage leading to stairs. The older man grabbed her around the hips, she turned to face him, pulled him towards her, kissed him hard on the mouth, tugged at his belt. He reached for the button of her CK jeans. Ripped it open, yanked them down. She kicked them off the rest of the way. She wasn't wearing panties. He pulled his jeans and underwear down. She grabbed his already hard cock, pulled him towards her. He put his hand on her groin, his finger on her clit, rubbing it softly, Bois moaned, and said, 'Fuck me.'

He took his hand away, pushed into her with his hard cock, she pushed back hard against him. He began thrusting wildly on the stairs, completely out of his mind for her. She knew it, and said, 'Keep going, keep going,' but he came too quickly, and it was over.

'That was great,' she said.

'Really?'

'Yeah, you're something.'

She led him upstairs through the main apartment, up another flight of stairs to her loft bedroom. She pulled him onto the bed, then stopped, relaxed.

He lay beside her breathing deeply.

She said, 'I want to play a game.'

'What kind?'

'You had your fun, now I want mine.'

'Alright.'

She got up and went to the top drawer of the chest of drawers beside the bed, pulled out two leather straps. He watched her a little unsure. She waved them in the air. He watched, unsure now.

'Turn over,' she said.

He did despite being unsure because she was the most amazing-looking woman he'd ever been with. Not an ounce of fat on her and she had this way of making you do whatever she said.

She reassured him, and said, 'Relax, I like to see men tied up and play with myself, that's all.'

'Uh, ok.'

He let her tie him to the rails on the bedhead. His face looking at the wall. She grabbed his left leg and stretched it out, he said, 'Hey, hey, what the fuck?'

She tied his leg to the railing under the bed with some black leggings that had already been placed there. She did the other leg while he complained.

'Hey, hey, wait a sec.'

She went to the second drawer down now. Brought out a black strap-on dildo attached to a black leather harness. She moved beside him so he could see it, he said louder,

'Hey, hey, this isn't me. I...'

She put the harness on. Moved behind him on the bed, pulled his legs apart, he said loudly,

'No. No.'

'Relax, baby.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SATURDAY MORNING. SALEM AND RHIA WERE IN BED. SALEM READING *THE Star* on his laptop. Taking a break from trying to crack the code on the USB. Rhia nursed a cup of coffee on her lap, stared at the window, wanted a cigarette. It was ten in the morning. Molly had gone to her friend Nick's place in Surrey Hills. Rhia said, 'You mind if I have a cigarette? We're celebrating after all. No more sex work. Molly isn't...'

'Here, yes, I know. OK, but open the window.'

She got out of bed in yellow undies and nothing else. Walked to the window, unlocked it, lifted it up high. There was a cool breeze. There had been a wild Sydney thunderstorm at about three in the morning that went for a couple of hours then the cool came. The window looked out onto a shared yard. The yard she had cut through on Friday morning on her way home.

The next-door neighbor was an ex-junkie, ex-alcoholic, name of Jim Wenders. A tall grey-haired skinny streak of a man. Jim usually sat and chained smoked out in the yard while drinking too much coffee. Molly loved him except for the smoke, and he indulged her by smoking only half as much when she was with him in the yard. She told him he was going to die of smoking. He told her that

nothing could kill him, he was indestructible. Molly thought it was hilarious because he was so frail-looking. They replayed the joke over and over again.

Salem read the sports section. He was a cricket tragic, learned the game from the odd job man in the state home he lived in. His name was Joe. He was a gentle kind man. He and Salem used to watch test matches together in his shed, where he had a TV and a radio. They used to watch the coverage on Channel Nine but listen to the call on the ABC. 'Can't stand those buggers,' he'd say about the TV commentary team, 'all bloody ego except Benaud.'

Rhia hated most sport except AFL and AFLW. She couldn't understand how anyone could watch a five-day cricket match and still no one could win. She went into the lounge, turned on the TV while looking for her cigarettes. The news was on Channel 11, a generic male newsreader talking about the death of a young man in Leichhardt.

'Police say the young man, Wayne Hampton, had no family and that he was brutally murdered in a crucifixion style religious killing. They refused to give any more details, only to say that they had no leads.'

Rhia looked at the screen at the same time they put a shot of Wayne up. It was the night clerk from Thursday night. The newsreader had said his name was Wayne Hampton. Rhia grabbed her cigarettes off the coffee table, lit one quickly, drew deeply, blew the smoke out in a furious rush then calmed a little bit. She was in the clear now, but the poor guy was dead, brutally murdered. Fuck. No one could identify her now. The guy. The poor guy. No family. But how did he die? Crucifixion. Hell.

She drew hard on her cigarette again, and said loudly, 'Salem, Salem,' as she rushed into the bedroom.

'The guy who was working the other night, the night clerk, he, he, um, shit, shit.'

'What? What? Calm down.'

'He was killed. It was on the TV. Brutally murdered they said.'

'The guy who saw you?'

'Yes, yes. The night clerk. He was killed.'

'Right, right. No one can identify you now.'

Yes, but.'

'I know. I know.'

'What d'you you think, babe?'

'I don't like it.'

'No. It's confusing. Good and too awful.'

'We need to find out who that guy was. The fat guy who died. I'll keep trying to hack into the USB. I'm going to watch the news on iView non-stop. Wait for a report on the fat guy. It was two days ago but the clerk got killed, it makes it more newsworthy.'

'I'm scared.'

'No, it's good for us. No one can identify you now. I know it's scary, but we should be alright.'

'I was scared before but now...shit.'

They didn't have to wait long. The 10.30 news bulletin confirmed that well-known New Light Church elder Robert Norton died in his sleep at home two nights ago. There were no suspicious circumstances. His death had been reimagined by Abbott (ignored by Steele and Thompson) and fed to the media. No mention of the missing USB. The next report was on the brutal death of Wayne Hampton. Those who needed to be shit-scared could join the dots. Others would simply accept it all. It confirmed Hampton had been a ward of the state up until three years ago.

Salem knew that life.

He turned to Rhia, and said, 'I need to get back to work on that USB. Find the code that opens it all up to me. They didn't say anything about it, but they couldn't, could they? The whole report. Both of them. Bullshit.'

Salem liked it. He liked the intrigue even though that guy Hampton was dead. In some ways, it was better like this. The stakes were higher now. A couple of months ago the pressure might have crushed him, maybe it still would. He went to have a shower before he started back at the laptop.

Rhia was shitting herself. She counted the cash they had. Wondered about taking another two thousand with the stolen credit card. There was no camera at the cash machine. They needed the cash she thought, if they had to make a run for it, they'd need all the cash they could get. Salem wouldn't agree but she could make him.

Salem came out of the shower, she followed him to their room, he dropped his towel on the floor, Rhia came up behind him, put her arms around him. Her right hand slid down his belly to his semi-hard cock. She started gently stroking him. He stood still, not saying anything, breathing more deeply, she said, 'I still have the second credit card I stole from the dead guy.'

'Shit, Rhia.'

'I can withdraw another two thousand,' she said, still stroking him. 'Then chuck the card down the drain.'

'I...shit. Uh, Rhia stop.'

She continued to slowly stroke him, and said, 'We need all the money we can get.'

Salem leaned back against her, nodded his head, she kept slowly stroking him as he started breathing in and out more rapidly, she kept stroking, kissing his neck. He caved in, she made him come

standing there. He almost fell backward, Rhia holding him up, hugging him tightly.

'Shit, Rhia, I...just do it. Do it for fuck's sake.'

Rhia withdrew two thousand from the ATM. Bent the credit card in half with her hands as she walked back towards Darlinghurst Road. She was wearing a big black hat that curved around her face, hiding her identity. She dropped the bent credit card into the same drain as the other night. Kept walking fast toward home.

Salem was wearing his tech glasses, staring at the screen. Eight account numbers with balances were displayed. Huge money. More than life changing. Only accessible through this USB? He wondered about that. If he tried to take the money who would know? What would he trigger? He switched screens. Looked again at the disturbing images and videos lined up in front of him with file names like Bobby; Bobby 2; Lisa 1; Lisa 2; James I and 2. Generic pseudonym names as some of the photos showed Asian, Latino, Aboriginal, and other nationalities along with young white boys and girls, some possibly underage, others perhaps yes; perhaps no. Hundreds of videos. Norton, he had seen in a few already but he didn't want to watch the others. Couldn't have it on his mind.

For Salem and Rhia this whole thing was now a hell of a lot more dangerous than it was only minutes ago. Salem thought of handing the USB to the police, but they would ask questions. If he could figure out a way to take only some of the money, skim some

off the top. He and Rhia could leave. Go to Melbourne or Perth, overseas, wherever, never work again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TONY WU WAS AN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNO FOR *THE STAR*, THE BIGGEST broadsheet newspaper in town. He looked at his ringing mobile phone around midday on Saturday. No caller ID. Here we go he thought.

'Tony Wu.'

'Norton died at the Carrington Motel in Kings Cross, not at home.'

It sounded like the call was from a public phone, people all around, talking everywhere, an echo.

'Who?'

'Norton, New Light Church.'

'This isn't the Secret Sydney column my friend.'

'You know how many candidates New Light are grooming for pre-selection Tony?'

'You have my attention.'

'Do something.'

The caller hung up.

Wu liked the connection the anonymous caller had made. Of course, it was news if he died in that sleazy motel. New Light was big business. Maybe they did want in on politics now as well. Money,

power, and religion. A heady mix. Not just the opium of the people, full control.

He wanted to start making calls but knew it might be tough work. It was a Saturday. The second Test match against India had started a few days ago. The whole city was in holiday mode. Even the PM was ensconced at his holiday property on the south coast.

Wu had some contacts in the NSW Police Force. He would start there. Wait until Monday to try and lure the big fish in. He wondered who was working the case. He called his mate Don Talbot. An old school Detective Inspector, who worked out of Kings Cross Police Station.

'Talbot.'

'Don, this is Wu.'

'Well, well, the Chinese Bernstein, looking for Deep Throat, are you mate?'

'Always a pleasure, Don. Who's running the case on Norton?'

'Norton, big wig at New Life Church or he was.'

'Yes and...'

'I heard he died at home in bed, heart attack.'

'I got an anonymous tip he died at the Carrington. Right on your turf, Don. No one tell you?'

Talbot started coughing, dragging up phlegm, and said, 'Shit. News to me.'

'Will you...'

'I will most certainly. Fuck this. Can't have that. I know the cunt who owns that motel. He owes me a few favors.'

'Think you can get back to me on this.'

'I think I can, Bernstein. Can't put a time frame on it old son but there will be hitting of the fan with it.'

'Thanks, Don.'

'Don't thank me yet. If I don't know about this then it's important. Whoever took the triple zero call knew where to send it. There would be some sort of protocol if the number of the Carrington came up at the emergency call center.'

'A trail.'

'You know your stuff, Mr. Wu.'

Talbot hung up.

Wu sat back in his chair. Did he have any connections with New Light? Would the anonymous caller reach out again?

Nine AM, Saturday at Thompson's Bondi apartment.

Thompson got out of bed slowly, only one or two people called him on his landline and they needed to be answered. He reached the phone in the kitchen just as Aimee woke up in the bedroom.

'Thompson.'

'It's Linda.'

'What's up?'

'I need the maintenance money, that's what's up.'

Thompson raised his voice a little,

'I did tell you it was going to be late, didn't I?'

'How late?'

'Fuck. Late.'

'Your daughter needs shoes., I need to put food on the table and...'

'You're a lawyer. You make damn good money so...'

'Principle, darling. You also make good...'

'You'll have it Monday,' he said raising his voice even more as Aimee appeared in the kitchen wearing one of his black t-shirts and

nothing else.

'Better be Monday Carter, don't want to...'

'Get the lawyers involved. Goodbye.'

Bitch he thought. Aimee raised an eyebrow at him, his cool demeanor had evaporated due to that call. He smiled at her. Kissed her on the forehead. She put her arms around his waist, tried to kiss him on the mouth. He turned away. She dropped her arms, hurt.

'Sorry, got a lot on today. Don't mean to be rude. I'll call you a taxi.'

'I'll put my clothes on.'

She dressed. Thompson went into the bathroom. It was going to be a big day. He turned on the shower, got under the lukewarm water, adjusted it to scorching, then wound it back to hot. He heard the front door slam. Finished the shower quickly. Went to his bedroom, changed into his black clothes. Went back to the kitchen. Pulled down a nearly full tin of jumbo-sized Nescafe instant coffee that he never used. He was a Nespresso guy, a pod machine coffee person. He emptied most of the contents onto a newspaper on the kitchen table. Picked out two small plastic bags full of white powder. Emptied a small amount from one onto the kitchen bench, cut two lines. Went to the bedroom, got a fifty-dollar note from his wallet.

Came back to the kitchen, snorted two lines rapid fire. He stood up straight, let out a 'whoo' sound, smiled, felt huge. Made a cone of the newspaper on the table and poured half the coffee back into the huge tin, added one of the plastic bags with the powder, then poured the rest of the coffee into the tin. Put it back in the cupboard. Put the other small plastic baggie into his pocket. Got his keys, wallet and left.

He was in the foyer of the council chambers slightly after nine AM. A woman in brown brogues, black pants that billowed out from

her knees down, a white, long-sleeved blouse put her hand out, said,

'Jill Anderson.'

He shook her hand gently, she gripped his hard, he almost laughed at her show of character but smiled instead, said,

'My name is Thompson but you know that.'

'Yes.'

'Shall we, do it?'

'Follow me, Mr. Thompson.'

She had him set him up at a cubicle. The desktop was on, she told him where to click, he smiled benignly at her again, said,

said, 'I got it.'

Jill Anderson stayed behind his right shoulder.

He turned, and said, 'I got it, Jill.'

She coughed for effect then left him to it.

He clicked on the file. The screen showed a camera app, he clicked on it. He had access to three CCTV cameras. One set up near the Goldfish Bowl where he had been last night. The other about halfway along the street between the Goldfish Bowl and the Carrington Motel. The other was down the other end of the Darlinghurst Road just before it became Macleay Street, near the fountain. Three more were out of order.

He clicked on the CCTV camera that was at the halfway point to the motel. He toggled along to one AM. Put on the headphones that Jill had provided, watched everything at about half-speed not knowing what he was looking for. Hoping to see the fat man. He went from one AM to four AM increasing the speed of the camera app as he grew frustrated. He started over again, watching at a faster speed hoping for something to catch his eye. It did. She was carrying a black handbag. There was something familiar about her.

He slowed the camera down, watched her. She walked not fast but briskly, she had a destination in mind, but the CCTV lost her not far past Kings Cross Station. He was sure it was a working girl he had been with years ago. Young and smart. He had even had a real drink with her after they had finished. He had never seen her again. What was her fucken name? It was during a wild period in his life where work was the only thing that kept him sane and alive. After he had split with his wife to take the job Steele had offered.

This girl. He had paid for her twice. He paid her, yes. But the drink they had was real, he knew that even though he had been drunk and high on speed. He had cracked a missing person case. Found a serial pedophile, taken down a hacker, while all the time high on uppers and downers, ins and outs and every-fucken-thing - in-between. Steele made him untouchable, cos he got results. But he had settled. Not used for a while until now. The private investigator from the Church had pissed him off, the motel owner not returning his calls, the hit and run attempt. Who was this girl? He couldn't remember her name. She had light brown hair. Clunky shoes. A denim skirt, black blouse. He knew her. Goddamit, it was her. But did she go to the motel? Would he catch her coming back the other way at three or four am? What was her fucken name? Zia? Zoe? Reece?

Shit.

Thompson stayed there for three, maybe four hours, reviewing the CCTV over and over. He got the girl whose name he couldn't remember outside the pizza shop at four AM, sitting on the stoop, eating hungrily. She got up and left. That was it. Why couldn't he get her before that? Darlinghurst Road was packed, she was small, didn't have any big distinguishing features, her clothes were plain, but he would have seen her, surely. He saved the CCTV to his

mobile and a USB he had brought with him then deleted it from the Council files. He got up, left without telling anyone.

Outside the Council offices, a woman with short blonde hair, dressed in a black Adidas tracksuit approached him. He stood stock-still. He knew who it was without ever having seen her before.

She walked straight at him, put her hand out, and said, 'Sally Bois.'

He ignored her hand and kept walking.

She shouted, 'safe driving.'

It bit Thompson but he kept moving away from her. Aimee had said red hair. She wore a wig the fucken bitch.

He walked up to Andiamo; he knew Aimee wasn't working. The slightly disheveled waiter in the baggy black pants, billowing white shirt, and Zapata Mo served him again, friendly but not familiar, Thompson liked that.

He drank his strong flat white, smoked a few cigarettes. Saved the best shot of the girl whose name he couldn't remember to his phone. Finished and paid. Walked back to the Carrington Motel. Got a call from Jill Anderson as he walked. She said, 'Detective Thompson did you delete...'

'Ma'am, I'm not a detective but if you have any problems call Mr. Steele, he'll help you more than I can. Goodbye.'

He walked into the Carrington. Henry and Bella were standing at the desk, Bella's eyes opened wide when she saw him. Henry clearly said 'shit' under his breath. Thompson knew instantly Bois had been there.

'Henry, Bella, I need you to look at this photo. I need you to tell me if you know this girl.'

They both nodded, said nothing. Bella reached for Henry's hand under the reception desk. He grabbed it, held it tight. They looked

at the photo, Bella said,

'No. Never seen her.'

'Me neither,' said Henry.

'You're sure now, both of you?'

'Yes,' they said together, hands gripped tight.

'You saw the police reports on TV?'

'Yep,' Henry said, 'we can't help you, Mr. Thompson.'

Thompson knew it was useless, and said, 'Right, thanks.'

Walked out. He was hot. Tired. Darlington Road, this dirty half-mile, festered in the sun like a sore on a rabid dog. It stank. Was dangerous. In the daytime this place had nothing much going for it anymore. The nights were overwrought with too much of everything.

When he got to the other side of Darlington Road and turned into Roslyn Street, Henry grabbed his arm. Thompson turned quickly, surprised, ready to hit someone, stopped, and said, 'What is it, Henry?'

'Rhia, the girl's name is Rhia, but you have to leave us alone now. I think they might have small hidden cameras around the motel.'

Thompson thought Henry looked scared out of his mind. He had reason to be. Bois and New Light were something. He knew that too.

'Thanks, Henry, it took balls to tell me that. I mean it. I won't bother you again.'

Thompson sat in his car. Called the motel owner, Les Connor. He answered.

Thompson said, 'Les Connor?'

'Yes.'

'My name's Thompson, you've been avoiding me.'

'Not at all, detective, what can I do for you?'

'I'm coming to see you now, please be at home.'

'I'm here waiting for you, Mr. Thompson.'

'Right, goodbye.'

Bois stood out the front of the Council Offices, called Abbott, he answered,

'Sally, what can I do for you?'

'He deleted the CCTV from the council files.'

'Remember what I said, Sally. Don't get angry. I think it's time I made some calls. I'll put some work into Mr. Thompson.'

Abbott hung up.

Sally smiled.

Walked to her car.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DI DON TALBOT MADE A CALL TO LES CONNOR WHO ANSWERED AFTER THE third ring. It was his mate Don after all.

'Don.'

'Got something you need to tell me?'

'No, I, ah, no.'

'Norton dies in your motel two nights ago and you don't tell me?'

'Sorry, Don, I...

'After all the protection I have afforded you, Les. That's bad manners. I found out from a journo. What's going on, *mate*?

'I can't talk about it, mate.'

'From now, I am not your mate. I am Detective Inspector Talbot, Kings Cross Police who may or may not tear you a new arsehole if I don't get the right answer. Understand?'

'He died. Heart attack in one of the rooms?'

'Heart attack, Les. Mate, you can do better than that.'

'He was with a hooker, died on the job.'

'Who came to look into it?'

'Guy called Thompson from what he said was the Prosecutors Office.'

A beat.

Two beats.

Talbot sighed, and said, 'You are in deep poo, my friend.'

'He's coming here soon. He rang me not long ago.'

'Can't help you on this one, mate.'

'What? Why?'

'They call him Cash, a nickname because he walks the line. Doesn't take no shit. You're about to find out why.'

'Don? Don?'

Talbot pressed end on the burner mobile he had used. Put it in his trouser pocket.

A few minutes later he got a call from the switchboard.

'Yeah.'

'Chief Commissioner is on the line. You want to talk to him?'

Talbot sighed, said, and said, 'Put him through.'

He waited, then said, 'Don Talbot.'

'Talbot this is Mike Sandino.'

'Yes.'

'Leave it alone.'

A beat.

'Leave it alone Detective Inspector. Understood?'

'Understood, boss.'

'You're a respected cop, Talbot, decent record, let's keep it that way.'

Talbot wasn't scared, intimidated maybe, but he wasn't stupid either. He was a survivor of any number of shitstorms. He picked his fights carefully.

Talbot called Wu back on that burner mobile of his.

'Tony Wu.'

'It's Don here.'

'Yes, mate.'

'I can confirm he died in the Carrington. I can't get involved in this one though, you understand?'

'How'd he die?'

'Some hooker screwed him to death. Fat bastard, unfit, etc., probably had some white powder pounding through his system.'

'Anything else before you leave me?'

'Thompson from the Prosecutors Office is running the case. Be careful with him if you decide to get interested. He's a number one prick.'

'Thanks, Don.'

'See ya, Wu.'

Tony Wu was going to keep looking into this. If Talbot was spooked, this thing had legs. He hadn't heard of Thompson. He called his boss, told him the story without mentioning Talbot's name. His boss was interested. Wu asked him about Thompson, how he could contact him. His boss gave him Steele's number.

Wu rang Steele.

'Hello.'

'My name is Tony Wu I...'

'I know who you are.'

'I'm investigating the circumstances around the death of Mr. Norton from New Light Church.'

'I can't help you, sorry.'

The call ended.

Wu called Talbot again.

'What now, Bernstein?'

'How can I find this guy Thompson? Last favor on this one.'

'I'll get you a mobile number but that's it. I'm out of this. You'll get a mobile number from a hidden ID call in about ten minutes. It'll be me.'

Thompson knocked on the door of Les Connor's Potts Point apartment. Connor's wife was on holiday on the Central Coast. He'd told her to stay there until this thing blew over. He had the penthouse in a ten-story apartment block down the far end of Macleay Street that had seen better days. A flunky on the front desk had called through to Connor to let him know he was on his way up. The door opened as he stepped out of the lift. Thompson saw a short, overweight, clean-shaven bald man, with eyes so pale they were almost albino. He was reminded of a pig. Les Connor said,

'Detective Thompson, come in.'

Thompson walked in; the smaller Connor moved to one side. Thompson waited inside the door for further directions. Connor said, 'Follow me.'

They walked down a long hallway into a big sunken lounge. There was a massive screen with a boxing fight between Stevens and Paul Holmes, a young aboriginal up and comer. It was three PM in the afternoon. Thompson said,

'Who's winning.'

'Just started, Stevens is pushing Holmes around.'

'Not for long.'

'Holmes man are you?' Connor said.

'He's a Koori, like me. We can fight you know.'

'You're an Abo?'

'Yeah, I'm an Abo you neanderthal fat cunt.'

'Huh, Oh, whoa.'

Where are you from Mr. Connor?'

'I'm a westie from way back.'

'But you don't live there.'

'Moved on and up.'

Thompson almost laughed, said,

'You want to tell me why you've been evading me, mate?'

Connor turned a shade of red. Looked away from Thompson, remembered his rehearsed lines from Sally Bois.

'I was home all-night Thursday night.'

'The death of this New Light Church big shot in your motel the other night. You did nothing about it. Why?'

'I got legal advice to say nothing.'

'Who from?'

'Sally Bois,' and as soon as he said it, he wished he hadn't.

'She school you did she, Miss Bois?'

'No, I ah, I was at home all night. I don't know anything.'

'I heard these church people bring young boys and girls to the Carrington? Do all kinds of nasty shit.'

Connor sat down on a big brown leather sofa. Rubbed both eyes with the heels of his hands. Big sigh. On the big screen, the lightly framed indigenous boxer snapped off a few left-hand jabs, pop, pop, pop, each one stinging the bigger Stevens. Connor lowered his head, got some kind of confidence infusion from somewhere, and said, 'No. Nothing like that. Never happen in my place. Some folks stayed there, that's all, nothing else.'

'Slunk in from the western suburbs or Bondi Junction. That's where the big church meetings are, aren't they, Bondi Junction? Slunk into Kings Cross with some young folk to have a chat about God in the rooms upstairs in your piece-of-shit motel, that it?'

'I don't know. I'm not their day-to-day. I run a few businesses. I was at home on Thursday night, all night.'

Holmes threw a big right cross into Stevens's jaw. Stevens' head jerked back, more of a thump than a sting this time.

'People from the church, New Light Church so we can be clear. People from New Light checked into your motel and your staff was under orders not to register them, not to issue receipts, to call them all David fucken Jones. Am I right?'

'Don't know anything about that. No records of those people in the motel, I'm sure.'

'What about Wayne, Les? What happened to him?'

'Don't know anything about that. I was home all...'

'This happened after that, in an apartment you rented to Wayne. He was killed, nailed to the wall, you cunt. A young guy brought up in a home. You gave him a job, an apartment, paid him. Then a fat guy, a fat guy who used to visit Wayne at that apartment, dies in your motel after bringing a sex worker there, a young girl who we have now identified, yes mate, we know who she is. Then Wayne gets killed the next day because he checked Norton in. You connecting the fucken dots, Les?'

Holmes chased Stevens across the ring, trying to corner him. Stevens dodged and weaved as Holmes stalked him. Backed away. Stevens not in control at all now. Holmes looking for the knockout blow.

'Well, Les, what have you got to say now?'

'Lawyer.'

'What?'

'Lawyer.'

'I'd say you'll definitely get that lawyer, Les. Cos you're gonna fucken need him.'

Thompson turned, walked back out the way he had come in. The keys were in the door, he opened it, didn't close it, walked to the lift. Walked across the road, got in his car, turned the fight on just as Holmes knocked Stevens to the canvas. The fight was held here

in Sydney, not far from Redfern where he was brought up. He'd put some fear into the prick. Connor would be making worried calls to the Church. Thompson thought the church might give Connor up for the greater good. He was a stupid man, easily manipulated. They might convince him to do 'soft time' for the greater good of the church and some financial rewards. Or they might bluff their way out of the whole thing. Thompson wanted to burn them all and their church to the ground. He called Steele,

'I think I might have the girl. I have her on CCTV before going to the Carrington but not after. It's a hunch so far. I have her name.'

'Good work, Thompson'

'I wiped the CCTV from the Council files.'

'I did get a call.'

'I was with Les Connor just now. Laid it all out for him. Didn't touch him but bullied him some.'

'And?'

'He squealed lawyer, so I left him to think about it.'

'Be careful with these people, Thompson. They're powerful. We do our job, no question, but like the old BBC TV program, softly, softly.'

'I'll do my best.'

'If you could and Thompson?'

'Yes.'

'I got a call from a journalist, Tony Wu. He's onto this. Knows we're investigating.'

'I've read his stuff,' Thompson said, 'he seems more likely to be on board with us than Abbott and co.'

'Needed to let you know and he's a journalist, the story is all that matters.'

'Right, thanks.'

'Keep hunting, Thompson.'

Tonight, he would come back to the Cross, bring the photo of the girl with him, ask around about her. He had her name, Rhia. He would check the online escort ads for her, but she wouldn't use that name, maybe a photo though? He wanted to see Aimee too, she was a good thing that had happened to him. He wanted to go with it but the job, always the job.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SALEM LOOKED UP WHEN RHIA WALKED BACK INTO THE FLAT, AND SAID, 'HEY, babe.'

'Hi.'

'You get it.'

'Yeah, tossed the card.'

'I think we should move.'

'What?'

'I found out what's on this USB. Access to a lot of money but video too of the fat guy with teenage boy and girls, other middle-aged men and women, with younger boys and girls. I don't know if they're legal age or not, but they're working, they're not doing it of their own free will. Most of their faces are joyless. I...I wish I hadn't seen some of it. I...'

'What? What are you talking about?'

'Did you hear me?'

'Yes.'

'Obscene acts, Rhia. Exploitation.'

'I...I know that type of person, Salem. I see it every fucken day. I run from them.'

'I know, sorry. That was thoughtless, babe. There's money though. Lots of it.'

'Yeah, um, the money. Can you get it?'

'Eventually, yeah, I think so. I can take enough for us to get an apartment somewhere new. I mean buy one not rent. Leave the rest of the money, throw the USB away. Take off.'

'What about Molly and school?'

'You saw how they killed the night clerk. They aren't fucking around. We're in big trouble here if they find out it was you. You go with Molly once I get the money. I should work it out by the end of the day.'

'How?'

'Buy a car. A second-hand car from someplace out in the west. Pay cash. Take whatever you need, drive to Melbourne. I'll finish up here. They're looking for you, not me. You changed your hair, that's cool. They probably wouldn't think you had a daughter. Go in the car, straight there.'

'A new beginning. Real jobs.'

'Yeah.'

'Are you sure you can get the money?'

'Soon, baby, soon. Yeah, I can do it. I'm trying to figure out what it will trigger if I take it.'

'Molly will be home soon.'

'Wait until I have the money in an account. We'll use one of my fake IDs to open an account online. I can transfer money to a new account for you, a new name, for Molly too.'

'Yes, yes. Do it?'

'There's nearly eighteen million in various accounts.'

'Eighteen million, Jesus, Salem.'

He smiled at her, and said.

'I'll skim off the top of all of them, take seven-fifty k. We can get a two-bedroom apartment in the burbs somewhere. I'll finish up here, clean up, get the bond money, make sure no one comes after us.'

'That's brave, Salem. Are you sure you'll be alright on your own? You know you...'

'I'll be fine. They'll know the money is gone not who took it.'

'Has to be us though.'

'You not us and they don't know who you are. Call that manager at the motel. Find out what they know?'

'If I call, they'll know it was me.'

'You're right. Shit. It's alright. You think you and Molly can go out somewhere while I figure this out. I think I need the quiet.'

'Yeah, I'll go pick her up. We'll go to the movies. She wants to see the new Marvel film.'

'Cool. I've taken down all your online ads, canceled the print ones. You're free.'

'Yeah, free, cool,' Rhia said like she was in some kind of trance, some weird daydream but she went back out the door, started walking to Molly's friend's place.'

Salem took his tech glasses off. Turned the laptop back on, he could do this. Patience, try different things, see the outcomes before they happen. Think code.

He worked it out. Wrote the code that would deliver the money, saved it to his own USB stick. He still wasn't sure what would be triggered. How quickly they would find out? He knew there were other copies of the USB because the code only worked if two other people submitted their passwords and a secondary code at the same time. Two other unknown entities on the dark web. Salem got around it. This is what he did. Got around shit like this. Wrote

genius code. Embezzled. Stole. A thief in the day and night. He smiled, and said softly, 'Fucken A.'

Rhia held Molly's hand as they walked along Oxford Street, past The Exchange, a nightclub that welcomed all members of all communities. She and Salem had tripped the light fantastic in there on more than a few occasions in their party days. She smiled at the thought, squeezed Molly's hand tight.

'Ow, Rhia, not so tight, you're squeezing the shit out of my hand.'

She let Molly's hand drop, smiled, and said, 'Don't fucken swear,' and they both giggled like crazy, walked on through the gardens, past the pool and the war memorial onto Pitt Street, where a new Cinema had opened. Holding hands again they went to the box office, got their tickets. There was a new member of the Marvel clan to be introduced in the new film. Razor. Like Flash but new. Razor would be played by a new young Australian actor, Tom Newton. Rhia decided she was going to love it. She and Molly always sat in the front row, looking up at the huge screen. The curtains started to separate; theme music played. They were truly going to be free for at least the next 96 minutes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THOMPSON'S MOBILE RANG.

Steele.

'Yes.'

'Bank called me. Someone withdrew \$2000 from the same account as the other night, same ATM, again, no photo. I don't know whether it helps or not.'

'She might be having one last dip, might be getting all the cash she can. Maybe she's a junkie now, in which case she'll go back again. What time was it?'

'A few hours ago. And what d'you you mean, *now*?'

'Nothing, a figure of speech. I'll go back over the CCTV footage.'

'Yes, hopefully, you get her this time. Keep hunting.'

Thompson couldn't do much more at this stage. He would go back to Kings Cross. He had checked all the online ads in the Wentworth Courier, googled a shit load more but she might wear a wig, she might do a lot of things. Thompson tried to think about the time he had spent with Rhia. It was genuine that drink. What had she said

to him? She had admitted being only eighteen, that she liked to go to big raves at warehouses and clubs, she didn't take drugs, just danced, went on her own or with a gay friend who she had told him worked on the wall. Thompson had thought she probably did take drugs at the raves but her arms had been clear, with no tracks marks. He had looked, made a point of it. She told him she lived in Potts Point in a high rise that happened to be next door to a brothel but she didn't work there, back then she advertised online, that was how he found her. She told him she did street tricks occasionally because she thought she could pick the guys who might be trouble, avoid them. Overconfident about that, he had thought at the time. He had been wired on speed, his preference over cocaine. Cheaper, stronger, dirtier street hit drug but not as fucked up as ice.

Ice was out though. He had seen the effects too closely in others. What else about the girl, Rhia? What could identify her? He couldn't think straight. He had to go back, have another crack at all the players, yes all of them.

His mobile rang, another number he didn't know.

'Thompson.'

'Mr. Thompson, my name is Abbott. I'm the...'

'I know who you are.'

'Good, good, now perhaps you could listen instead of interrupt...'

'Fuck off. I'm not ready to talk to you, yet. I'll let you know when I am.'

'How's your wife and daughter, Mr. Thompson? Perhaps all three of you could come to a service on Sunday, maybe...'

'I hope you're not threatening me.'

'Not at all, simply extending an invitation. They live in the eastern suburbs, don't they?'

Thompson ended the call. The prick was trying to bait him. He let it go. Took the small plastic baggie out of his pocket. Emptied enough of the stained white powder onto the kitchen table for three lines. These low mongrels that hid behind religion, he thought. Giving them what they thought was a license to do anything they pleased. He would shut them down. Every single last one of them.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THOMPSON DROVE TO KINGS CROSS. PARKED. WALKED TO THE MAIN DRAG. Started doing his version of knocking on doors, by hitting up the strip club spruikers, who were cautious at best, unhelpful at worst. He stuck his head in at The Carrington. Told the girl on reception who he was. Her name was Andrea, a big fat babe, flabby arms, blond hair, maybe forty, tough lines around her eyes.

She said when he told her he was from the Prosecutors Office,
'Not talking to you.'

A straight shooter. In a calm voice he explained what it was he wanted. He saw her mellow a bit.

'You can call me Andy, babe,' she said, winking. Thompson smiled despite himself.

'You know this girl,' he said, showing her the photo of Rhia.

'No, but nothing sticks out with her does it, nothing catches your eye. That mousy hair, average clothes, height, everything.'

'You should join the police force, Andy.'

'They wouldn't have me. Checkered past, which explains why I'm in this dump.'

'You got a new night porter here, yet?'

'Starts tonight.'

'His name?'

'Anton.'

'I know the two lovebirds, who is the third receptionist?'

'Was Tracey, she quit. A guy who used to work here is coming back. His name is Sam. Mid-thirties, bit like me, been around the block too many times, looks about fifteen years older than he is, but rugged kind of.'

'Woman talk to you people here? Threaten you about what happened in that room upstairs on Thursday night last.'

'I got paid to shut up, gonna stick to it even though you're a handsome guy.'

'You know David Jones?'

'Yeah, I know them all but like I said. I got paid, and I'm not stupid either. Number one. I need the job because of that past I told you about. Number two. That bitch even scared me, and you know how Wayne died. Number three. New Light Church.'

'I got it, Andy.'

'You want to call me, rumble with a fat chick, you let me know,' she said, gently laughing.

'I will.'

Thompson was pissed. Bois had fucked with the minds of the staff. Steele wouldn't put cops in yet to protect them, wanted to draw them out to do something stupid they could use. The heat hung all over the semi-deserted strip. Rising up from the drains and gutters. The hot asphalt. Getting into his nostrils, his eyes, the grit. Fuck this place. He stopped sex workers, both male, and female, none of them recognized her. He stopped in at a few cafés. Nothing. Went in and out of dive bars. Nothing. Then he remembered her sitting on the step of the pizza shop. He went there, showed her

photo to an old guy with a black apron, black beard, bloodshot eyes, said to him,

"You know her?"

'Yep, she comes in here semi-regular. Gets a few slices, sits down on the step like you said. She can eat, comes back for seconds sometimes. Nice, friendly, she in trouble?'

'No. She ever come in with someone else? A male, maybe gay, a sex worker you might have seen bopping around the place?'

'No. On her own, always, usually late like three-four AM.'

'What's your name?'

'Eddie.'

'Eddie, this is my card, you see her, you call me, alright?'

'She's not in trouble? I'm not a fucken rat.'

'Her mother's looking for her. Hasn't seen her for years. Worried about her.'

'Alright, I see her, I'll call you.'

'Thanks, Eddie.'

Thompson started walking back to his car, all the while racking his brain about the girl. It was something, not much but something. He stopped, turned around, decided to walk up to the infamous wall where young men plied their trade. Boys mostly.

On the way he called Aimee, she picked up.

'Hello.'

'It's me, Thompson.'

'Feeling friendlier, are we?'

'Sorry, work.'

'I'll let it slide once.'

'How about later tonight, you working? I'm walking that way now.'

'No, I quit.'

'Quit. Wow.'

'I hated it, but I'm a good actor, so you didn't see it.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Become an Instagram girl.'

'Oh, I can see that.'

'When do you finish working?'

'Couple of hours'

'You want to come to my place in Newtown?'

'I want to come, yes.'

'See you, then. And Thompson?'

'Yes.'

'I like you. A lot.'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SUNDAY MORNING, BOIS WOKE UP, ROLLED OVER ONTO HER BACK, LOOKED TO her left. Zlatan Lukic was in bed with her, back turned to her. His hair was shaved down to a number one cut. Rough body hair on his bunched, hard, muscled shoulders. He had been with Bois when she killed Wayne. Zlatan was a good fuck. Bois had done him twice now but dangerous. A temper. A Croatian guy who ran with Billy Hassan. As she looked at him lying there, she already wanted him gone. She got out of bed, walked naked to the kitchen, opened the fridge, took out milk. Turned on the Nespresso coffee machine, got some pods from the cupboard, put the whole process in motion. Made herself a strong latte, a long macchiato for Zlatan. Walked into the bedroom. Put her coffee on a small chest of drawers on her side of the bed. Pushed Zlatan roughly with her right hand, he stirred, she pushed him again.

'Fuck. Fuck. What the fuck are you doing, you crazy...'

'Coffee. I have church this morning, you have to leave.'

He didn't like it. He felt the familiar rage coming but Hassan had told him not to mess with the girl, not to lose it. She had connections. She was important. That's all he remembered. She had connections. She was important. He rolled over, pushed his strong

back up against the bedhead, took the small glass with his long macchiato in a huge, meaty, hand, sipped it. Put it down.

'That's good coffee. You remembered.'

'Yes.'

'You want to fuck again?'

'No.'

He lit a cigarette from a pack of Marlboro Red he picked up off the floor. There was no ashtray. He would improvise. She let him smoke. He would probably explode if she didn't. She wondered if she could beat him in a fight. Stick a knitting needle in his eye. A smile came to her lips. He tipped the cigarette ash into the half-empty pack of Marlboro.

'I'm showering, you have to go.'

'You fucken tell me what to do again. I swear to God, I...'

She kept walking. Thought that this was definitely the last time she would fuck him. Too dangerous. Too mental. She could pick up other less volatile types.

Rhia was making poached eggs for Molly. Her favorite. She put toast into the toaster. Salem had figured it out. He hadn't done the business yet but had figured it out. He would wait until Monday. The fake IDs would take another day. She had found a car online that she thought might be alright. It was a second-hand Mazda 3 that had only done five thousand K. It was a red five-door hatch-back. She had never owned a car before. She was an Uber queen but the thought filled her with joy. She and Molly on a road trip to Melbourne. To the suburbs. Get a job somewhere doing something else. A waitress would be fine. She liked people; liked being

friendly. A new school for Molly. She was scared too. Of how Wayne died. She knew the Church was powerful, that they and the police were looking for her. What had the duty manager said? Had he seen her meet the man the first time. She couldn't remember who had been on the desk. The eggs were ready, the toast shot out of the toaster.

'Molly. your eggs are ready.'

Molly walked into the kitchen in her pajamas smiling, and said, 'Thanks, Rhia.'

'Call me mum, baby, OK, please, just for me.'

Molly smiled, cut into the egg yolk and toast.

Thompson sat in his car, about one-hundred meters from the New Light Church, small binoculars held up to his eyes. It was deadly hot, sweat pooled at the base of his spine in his bum crack. He had some eyes on him. A guy in a white Ford Festiva, parked about ten car lengths behind him. Thompson had picked him up on Old South Head Road. He had gone home to shower and change. It was a male. Close-shaven hair. The show was over at New Light Church, people making their way out. It was not a church; no local church could hold the five to six-hundred or so people. It was a purpose-built, modern entertainment center. There were tens of thousands more watching the live stream all-round the country. This gathering was for well-dressed Christians and no doubt included, Christian rock and Anthony Robbins style motivational speeches more than sermons. Thompson was reminded of the Pharisees in the bible, those rule-making cunt hypocrites that Jesus hated so much. The greatest story ever told. It was a hell of a read, he agreed.

He watched them meander out, led by the chief cunt Abbott followed by the plebians, happy to be anywhere near the great man. Then, fuck me, Sarhan Al-Abadi walked out. The Sean Connery look-a-like. The unflappable, pain in the arse writer. A thought came into his head. He knew Bois would have needed a second person to help her nail the young man to the wall. Could it be the pain in the arse from upstairs? The eyes and ears, the gossip, who was at home all day. He was big and strong enough and here he was at the 'church'. Did he have the stomach for it? Thompson would need to find out.

He had already decided to heat things up. He would arrest Les Connor after this little fishing expedition was over. Not personally. He would have Steele get two plain-clothed detectives to take him in. He would get his lawyer but he would spend time in a cell before the lawyer arrived. Thompson knew he didn't have anything solid. The staff at the motel were too scared to speak. There was no paperwork.

He might have to find the young men and women, the girls and boys that all those David Jones New Light people hooked up with but how. How? He couldn't guarantee the staff any safety, not with Bois and now this prick following him. It was an impossible task. But hopefully putting Connor in a cell would shake things up. The girl. The girl. She was the key.

Nothing else surprised him much as he looked through the binoculars, middle-class bogans he thought to himself. A politician or three, a top cop, hmmm, a few grade Z celebrities but some hot shots too, some sportsmen and women, current and retired. Bois wearing a black pants suit looking somber. Bois had given Zlatan the job of following Thompson after speaking to Billy Hassan getting approval from Abbott. Thompson called Steele.

'At the local Vatican service.'

'And?'

'The usual flotsam and whatever the other word is.'

'Jetsam.'

'Yep. I want to arrest Les Connor today. Can you send two plain-clothed detectives to march him up Macleay Street to Kings Cross cop shop.'

'I can.'

'Also, I got some meathead on my tail. I need to get rid of him. Might use Ari if you approve, boss?'

'With a warning of extreme caution. Your friend Ari is very loose, Thompson, very loose. Keep him on a leash, a tight leash. I mean it. Get rid of the tail but nothing else no...no Aristotle Karakas madness.'

'Got it. This might heat things up some more. Abbott rang me, mentioned I had a wife and daughter, how lovely they were, how they lived in the eastern suburbs, you following me.'

'To be expected. You want me to take them into care.'

'Not yet.'

Thompson was feeling better. Aimee had worked some beautiful magic on him last night. Although his trip to the wall had been a waste of time. Their parting this morning was much improved from the day before. But thoughts of his wife and daughter tugged hard at him. Their safety. The desire not to scare them by having Steele take them under care somewhere.

He rang Ari, told him what was going on, drove home after seeing the last of the churchgoers file out. When he got out of his car at his Bondi address, he saw Ari parked two cars away in a green Volkswagen Golf. He also turned and saw the man who had been tailing him pull up on the other side of the road. He cocked his

head at the Ford Festiva, Ari smiled. Thompson shook his head went inside.

Ari got out of his car as Zlatan got out of the white Ford. Ari wore cut-off jeans, a light blue t-shirt, thick socks, brown work boots on his feet. He was balding, with enormous shoulders, his gut hung over the cut-offs, he had a three-day growth of beard that was rough and messy looking. He scratched the back of his neck, walked up to Zlatan with a cigarette, said, and said, 'Got a light, my friend?' 'Fuck off.'

Ari slammed the heel of his right boot into Zlatan's shin who staggered back then bent down in agony. Ari grabbed the collar of Zlatan's black T-shirt with his right hand, punched him in the side of the head twice with his left. Zlatan was tough but this had come out of nowhere, he was trying to steady himself, to somehow get centered but Ari said, 'No, my friend.' Hit him in the kidneys hard three times, one powerful shot after another. Zlatan went down again, Ari skinned his right shin with his work boot again, the pain shooting up Zlatan's leg, then yanked his head back, spat in his face, hit him again, twice in the face. Zlatan was flat out on his stomach on the hot asphalt road. A guy across the road was watching from his front gate. Ari waved at him and he went inside. It was a still Sunday morning, earlyish by Bondi standards. A white four-wheel-drive drove past. Ari waved again. The kids in the back seat waved oblivious to the hurt the man on the ground was suffering. Ari knelt down, put his hot breath in the ear of Zlatan, and said, 'You're a tough guy, huh,' kissed him on the side of the head, then punched him in the balls twice, fast and hard. Zlatan puked up, Ari laughed, and said, 'Tough guy, huh, like following people,' hit him in the balls again, twice, dragged him across the hot asphalt back to

his car, laid a boot into his head, knelt beside him again, and said, 'Who sent you?'

Zlatan couldn't talk, his balls felt like they were up inside his stomach, ached like nothing he had experienced before, he was being done over better than he had ever done anyone over.

'Who sent you?' Ari asked again, slamming Zlatan's head into the white Ford. Kissed him again on the cheek, and said, 'Next time, I ask you for a light, you might give it to me, huh? What d'you you say, tough guy.'

Zlatan waited for it to come, the finish. He feared what was going to happen. Ari grabbed him by the front of his T-shirt, put his face right up to his nose, and said, 'Last chance, who sent you?'

Hit him again, twice in the stomach another in the balls. He puked dribble from his mouth, thought to himself, not Hassan, I can't give him up and he said, 'Bois, the girl, Sally Bois.'

Zlatan's head dropped, thinking it would be over now.

Ari kicked him in the head with his left boot, punched him hard on the side of the head, his ear started bleeding from the inside, took the car keys from his pocket, opened the door, dragged him into the driver's seat, and said, 'Game over.'

Slammed his forehead into the steering wheel three times, hard. Took out a small blade from his shorts pocket, sliced a thin cut into Zlatan's cheek, for effect, not pain. To remember the beating. Blood leaked down his face.

Ari closed the car door, left him. Turned back, watched Zlatan dribble some yellow bile out his mouth. Picked up Zlatan's mobile from the street where it had been knocked out of his T-shirt pocket. Dialed triple zero, told them a man was in a car acting strangely, described the white Ford, told them the address it was out the front of, then threw the phone down a drain. Walked up the stairs to his

friend's place. He had a name, had delivered a strong message. Thompson had told him what was going on at the motel with the young boys and girls. Ari hadn't liked it one bit.

He walked down the side of Thompson's apartment block, knocked on the wire screen door, shook it some. Thompson appeared, and said, 'You trying to rip the wire screen door off or what?'

'Maybe or what. I don't think that bitch will be following you again unless he's cut from something special.'

'You didn't...'

'I didn't. He'll be fine physically in a couple of days, but he might be a little nervy, a bit sheepish so to speak.'

'Come in. I got some other stuff I want to run by you. This thing gets bigger by the day.'

'I'm on a retainer then, cos I got other work, always got other work and...'

'Steele approved it, the usual fee but my way, my rules, understood?'

'Understood,' Ari said, laughing out loud.

Thompson shook his head and whispered to himself, 'Fuck me.'

Two detectives were walking Les Connor up Macleay Street. He kept asking for a lawyer, they ignored him all the way up the street to the Kings Cross Police Station. His old *friend* Don Talbot told him why he was there. Readout a list of charges, put him in a cell after he called his lawyer. He would sweat in there but not for long. But he hadn't rung his lawyer, he had rung Abbott.

Bois came home after the church meeting. She wanted to believe in everything New Light offered. How else to make sense of her disturbing life? She sat in a huge bird cage-like seat, a type of swing chair facing the bay, kicking her legs about like a little girl. Stretched a bit, her mobile rang. She saw it was Billy Hassan, her pulse rate increased, sweat came to her forehead but she smiled, excited.

'Billy?'

'Yes.'

'How did Zlatan go tailing Thompson, the Abo cop?'

'He's in hospital, babe.'

'What?'

'I don't usually repeat myself.'

A beat.

Two beats.

Billy Hassan sat in a big black swivel chair in his office at the back of one of his strip clubs on Darlington Road, there was a view out onto a dirty laneway. The big steel door was locked, the room was soundproofed, contained only a desk, landline telephone, a laptop connected to CCTV. The air-con was on high. His feet were on the desk. Hassan was dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt, a black vest, brand new, low waist, shiny blue jeans. Black Adidas runners with the three white stripes. He was baby-faced, clean-shaven, his hair was a severe mullet that came to collar length, the sides shaved.

Bois sweated some more, looked around for the air con remote, said, 'I'm sorry.'

'That's better.'

'How can I make it right?'

'We'll work something out, but you owe me a favor now, a big favor.'

'Uh, yes'

'Must have been a real pro, Zlatan is a tough guy. His balls are swollen, the guy put a thin cut down his cheek. There'll be a scar, a reminder. Be interesting to see how Zlatan handles it, whether he can come back?'

'Uh, yeah, I...I'm'

'You're sorry, I know. Your boss Mr. Abbott and me we have some things in common.'

'I don't get it.'

'You put us together a few years ago, babe, remember when he wanted some muscle?'

'Uh, yes.'

'I also introduced the young men and women for their trysts, for their fucked-up members to do whatever they wanted.'

He laughed.

'I didn't know that.'

'But you went to the Carrington, you tidied things up. It's your job. You fixed Wayne.'

'Yes.'

'I think you can go one better. I don't want this shit flowing downhill to me, understand?'

'Yes, what can I do?'

'Who's the weak link? Don't worry, I'll tell you. The young receptionist, the pretty girl called Bella. Not the other two, not the duty manager, they've been around the block. Follow Bella home. Find out everything she knows. Do whatever has to be done.'

Thompson has a name. He told Les Connor he has the name of the girl.'

'Right, I can do this.'

'How'd he get the name, Sally baby?'

'Uh...I'

'He got footage, right? Because he blocked you at the Council re the CCTV?'

'Yes.'

'He got a look at who he thinks the girl is. But he's not sure how it all fits. He goes back to the Carrington and asks, gets nothing but guess what, he's leaving the Carrington and that Duty Manager there, he runs across the road after Thompson, my man saw him, he tells him something, then turns and goes back. You following this?'

'I go to the girl, put some pressure on her and...'

'You put the fear of that fucked up God of yours into her. You *don't* do what you did to Wayne. You get the name of the girl. I'll find her. Kings Cross, it's my town, baby.'

'I can do that for you. I'll check in with Mr. Abbott.'

'You do that baby girl; you get the name. I'll find her.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

RHIA HAD EXPLAINED TO MOLLY THAT THEY WERE ALL MOVING. THAT HER surname was going to be changed. She would have Salem's surname now. It was traditional. They were moving tomorrow, Tuesday. There wouldn't be time to say goodbye to her friends. Molly was kind of used to the odd life her mother led even not knowing the full truth of it. Rhia had told her she worked as a masseuse (it kept the lying to a minimum) late at night and so on. She knew that Salem had been in jail, but Rhia burnt into Molly's brain that it was a mistake. They got the wrong person. Salem was a good guy. Molly bought it because she was a kid and loved Salem as much as she loved her mum.

This was hard though. She made friends easily. She had strawberry blonde hair, was a little chubby but not fat, incredibly open to everyone, not yet hardened in any way with the ills of the world. Rhia told her she could email as many of her friends as she liked but she had to tell them she was in Perth, not Melbourne, not for long, only for a few months then it would be over. Molly didn't get this part at all, but her mum warned her how serious it was, people were trying to put Salem back in jail again for the wrong thing. Molly would do anything to stop that.

'You're going to have to call me mum from now on. My first name is changing but just call me mum, alright, all the time, it's part of the plan. This is serious, Molly. Always, for a long time now, always call me mum. Rhia is gone, that's over. We need it to help Salem. You understand?'

'Yes, mum.'

'Good girl.'

'What about Jim Wenders?' Molly asked. She always used his first and second name together.

'He's coming for dinner tonight. He's part of the whole plan to get away. You can say anything you like to him?'

'Can I give him a big kiss and cuddle goodbye?'

'I think that's exactly what you should do.'

'Ok, it sounds like fun a bit, do you think?'

'The whole thing is going to be the biggest fun, I think.'

'Here babe,' Salem said to, Rhia handing her the Victorian Driver's License he had printed from his 3D printer.

'You like it, Miranda?'

Rhia looked at the photo, with her short white hair, smiled, she liked Miranda. She could be Miranda O'Donnell, easily. Molly ran to her bedroom.

'It's great, Salem. I love you. I really do. It's exciting but scary. I guess we never might know, um...'

'Never know what?'

'If we're safe, ever.'

'No, I think we will. I do. At some point, we'll hear something. They'll charge somebody with killing Wayne and that will be it. I think it will end and if not, it doesn't matter. You didn't do anything wrong. We'll keep living, keep going forward, forget it all.'

'I hope so.'

'Trust me, Miranda.'

'You're keeping your name.'

'Surname yeah, for Molly remember, not sure about what new first name.'

"I think we made a mistake with that. I think we need to change your whole name. She can remember a new name, play the game, she'll do anything to keep you safe?"

'Alright, let me think of something,' he said. 'I haven't done my ID, yet.'

They both smiled nervously, tomorrow it would be happening.

On Monday morning, Abbott was sitting in an armchair in his library. Les Connor was sitting opposite him, Abbott said,

'They have no proof. Whatever happens from now, they have no proof. Hearsay, that's all. That's why they let you go without any charges.'

'Talbot read them out, what they were going to do...'

'That was before you rang me, Les. No charges have been laid. They were trying to scare you. Stay away from Talbot. He's not on our team. Understand, Les?'

He nodded his head.

'Say it, Les. Say you understand.'

'I understand.'

'Now, go home, forget about it. We don't need you anymore.'

'Huh.'

'Any business between us is over now.'

'I...don't.'

'You're a liability, Les. We don't need you.'

'I don't get it.'

'Go home. I'll be in touch, don't worry, you'll be looked after on this matter. You stick to what Miss Bois told you. You were at home last Thursday night. No more anonymous bookings from us. No more cash delivered to you. Do you understand now?'

'Yes.'

'Good. You're on your own. You have a few businesses you need to run. Try and be a bit more hands-on, Les. My advice only.'

Abbott saw him out.

Les Connor didn't get it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CARTER THOMPSON SAT DOWN AT HIS COMPUTER TO VIEW THE CCTV FOOTAGE again. He went through it a few times. It took him a few hours, but he couldn't get anything new. He knew it was Rhia but where did she go after the pizza? Damn CCTV. He had Ari watching Bois at her place in North Bondi.

He and Ari had been at the academy together. Both were at the top of their class until Ari was kicked out for giving one of the Physical Instructors a beating. Ari had pulled him up for bullying a young cadet. The instructor was a hardened veteran, known for sometimes going too far. He thought Ari was joking when he said, 'Why don't you try that on me?'

The old pro, Mike O'Shea looked at Ari and laughed. Ari was overweight at a young age, but he was still able to complete all the drills, and his endurance was solid. He was a freak at lifting weights and liked by all his classmates, but they had no idea about his fighting skills until this cold winter morning twenty years ago.

Ari met Mike O'Shea front on, his hands hung low down by his side, like Ali at his peak. As the old pro came at him with his hands up, shaping like a fighter, O'Shea threw a hard right and clipped Ari on the side of the head. Ari smiled at him, stood still. O'Shea moved

around him, threw a left this time but Ari grabbed his arm below the elbow, twisted it, backhanded the old pro with his right. O'Shea staggered a bit, hurt, he had never been hit like that, that early in a fight. He brought himself together into a tight stance, his hands up again, wary as fuck now. Ari moved around a bit now, his arms and hands still hung low, and he shuffled in the dry dirt that they stood on next to a basketball court.

O'Shea came at him head-on again but slow and steady trying to draw Ari out. Ari waited. O'Shea stalked him but Ari waited. The bigger O'Shea moved in, threw a fast left-right combination, hit Ari on the left side of his head, clipped his nose, blood ran out. Ari wiped it off, and said, 'Come on, big guy, what you got for me?'

Smiling, almost laughing.

O'Shea came at him, threw a flurry of punches that Ari ducked, and blocked, his hands up now. He moved around quicker too, dancing not shuffling, light on his feet for an overweight fellow. He hit O'Shea fast, three-four times, the bigger man couldn't stop the blows. He backed away. Ari swung a kick into his kidneys that bit the older man hard, he winced, Ari moved in close, hitting him three times in the same spot he had kicked him. O'Shea buckled. Ari grabbed him by the hair, pulled his head back, and kicked the legs out from under him. The older man dropped to the dirt, rolled over onto his back. Ari hit him with his right fist to the temple. O'Shea drooped. Ari grabbed his head by his hair, pulled his right fist back. Carter Thompson yelled,

'No! No!'

Ari turned, looked at Thompson, who said, 'No, Ari, you made your point.'

Ari walked over to Thompson, and said, 'See you my friend, stay in contact,' and left, walked to the dorms, packed his stuff, and left.

He got the official 'you're kicked out letter' a few days later.

Ari rang Thompson,

'She's driving out now. I'll follow, keep my distance as you said.'

'No contact, Ari, please?'

'Yes, I'll follow only. I got your orders boss. I have to go. She's driving off.'

Thompson wasn't sure of his next move. Abbott had sprung Les Connor. Who would stick to his lame *I know nothing* defense. His wife had backed him up too, in a phone call. Abbott had called her, told her to stay away. But they thought he had the girl, that was something. The guy who had been following him had ended up in hospital overnight. Steele had rung him this morning to say that 'Lebanese' Billy Hassan had picked him up early that morning from the hospital.

Bois knew some trash alright.

Billy Hassan was a dangerous thug but organized. People feared him. Feared what he had done, which in turn showed what he was capable of.

Anything and everything.

Ari followed a hundred or so meters behind Bois in his Golf. He smoked with the window down, flicking ash as he drove. She did a few quick turns left and right, but Ari knew these streets. He knew all of Sydney well, it was his job as a PI to know them. A black Range Rover accelerated past him on Blair Street, it was a wide, fairly quiet street that usually only attracted local traffic. Ari drove on, Bois still in view. The Range Rover slowed and stopped in front of him. Ari pressed hard on the horn on the steering wheel. Billy

Hassan got out of the car, pulled a gun from the back of the waistband of his trousers. Zlatan, struggled, hobbling out of the passenger door, he also pulled a gun from the back of his waistband. Ari froze for a split second as Hassan said loudly,

'Get out.'

Ari jammed the car into reverse, floored the accelerator, screaming out loud,

'Fuuuck you!'

Hassan started firing off shots. He hit the front light, the top of the windscreen in the middle of the Golf, Ari was laughing now, screaming, as the windscreen started to crack more and more.

'Come on you cunts!'

Hassan ran at the Golf, firing at the car but only hitting the hood and the side of the car as Ari swerved it around to face the other way. He had done and exceeded in all the driving simulations at the academy. He had been fired at before. This was his job. He reveled in it. Hassan slowed to a jog. Zlatan shook his head. They both turned, walked back to the Range Rover but Ari drove fast and hard, turned a three-sixty down the wrong side of the road opposite then. Hassan and Zlatan could only watch as he accelerated past them, leaving them standing in the middle of the road. Ari blew his horn again, popped the Saints into his ancient cassette deck, *Stranded* blared out. He smiled, accelerated some more hoping to still find Bois, but it was too late, she was gone.

He drove onto Old South Head for a little while then turned left into Penkevil Street and called Thompson.

'Ari, what?'

'Let you down my friend, she got away. That loser from yesterday and another guy pulled up in front of me in a black Range

Rover, pulled out handguns, started firing at me with no care if anyone else was around.'

'You alright?'

'Yeah.'

'The guy from the hospital is Zlatan Lukic, he runs with the Billy Hassan crew. Hassan picked him up from hospital this morning. That's who shot at you.'

'I've heard of Hassan, not the other loser. He has a bad rep for violence.'

'So do you.'

'Could get nasty then.'

'Off the books, it might, yeah but not on the books.'

'Can you get an address for Hassan for me?'

'I know he lives in a big Italianate-style mansion in Watson's Bay. Surprised the locals there let him, but money talks I guess.'

'Get me the address. I'll see what I can find out.'

'Probably doesn't need to be the full catastrophe, Ari. Not yet.'

'Understand. But why is the church and Bois hanging out with this guy, Hassan.'

'Maybe you can find out. Among a shitload of criminal activity. Hassan runs girls and boys, so maybe he supplied them to the motel owner, Connor. Helped the church out?'

'Right, Cash, I have to go. What's your move?'

'There's a guy who lived at the Leichhardt apartment block. Mr. Nice-guy. He was at the church service, yesterday. The prick failed to tell me he was a member even after he knew young Wayne was tortured, murdered. He knew the fat guy, Norton visited him. Knew Wayne too. He's a complex cunt but maybe I can push him around a little more, get some answers.'

'If you're looking for someone who helped Bois kill that kid. Zlatan might be the one?'

'Ok, you do your thing, I'll do mine.'

Hassan had rung Bois. Told her what had happened. That Ari had got away. Bois had pegged him watching her a few hours before the gunfight in the street. Hassan said,

'He's dangerous this guy in the Golf. My advice is to stay away from him. You know what he did to Zlatan.'

If anything, it intrigued Bois, this guy who professionally bashed Zlatan and had now got away from Hassan. Who was he? Did Thompson bring him into this?

She told Hassan, 'Yes, I'll let you know what happens with the girl. What she knows.'

'Talk soon,' Hassan said.

Hit end on his mobile.

Bois drove to Kings Cross. Hassan had told her the girl parked her car in the car park at The Hyatt Hotel. The Hyatt, famous for being at the top of The Cross with the big Coke sign hanging off it. Bois paid for parking, found Bella's second-hand Mazda 2. Waited.

Bella arrived at ten minutes after midday. She was on a short shift, 7 am to midday. She started her car, backed out, slid her pass by the green light. The boom gates opened. She left with Bois on her tail. She drove to Newtown. Parked on Camden Street and walked to her front door. Bois grabbed her arm as she put the key into the lock of the front door in the small, rented terrace house she now shared with Henry, who was still at work. She jerked her head back, and said, 'What the...what?'

Bois smiled at her.

Bella froze in fear.

Shit.

Shit.

Bois said, 'Go inside. I want to talk, nothing else, only talk.'

'Ok, ok.'

'She walked into the small hall, put her handbag on the hat rack. Stopped. Bois said, 'The kitchen. Where's the kitchen?'

Bella pointed her finger down the hall. Shaking now. Knowing what happened to Wayne.

'Go there. We'll talk there.'

Bella walked down the hall her head bowed. Bois following. They sat opposite each other at a Laminex table on steel legs. Four white cushioned chairs around it. Two are vacant now.

'You know why I'm here?'

'Not really.'

'Your boyfriend, the duty manager. Henry right?'

'Yes.'

'Henry told the detective something. Mr. Thompson, you know him.'

'Yep, I know him.'

'Henry ran out of the motel across the road, told him something. I think he told him who the girl was in the room with the man who died. The girl who was with Mr. Norton in room 308.'

'I don't know.'

'Don't you,' Bois snarled. 'don't you fucken bullshit me you little slut.'

Bella started shaking uncontrollably, small little shakes, tears running down her eyes. Bois got up went to the cutlery drawers, found a steak knife. Grabbed Bella by her long black hair, pulled it

tight. Bella started softly sobbing now. Bois put the knife at her throat, and said, 'I will cut you if you bullshit me again.'

Silence.

A beat.

Two beats.

The knife at her throat, Bella said, 'Rhia, her name is Rhia.'

Bella rang Henry straight after the visit from Sally Bois,

'She put a bloody knife at my throat.'

'I'm coming home now, alright, straight away. I'll call Thompson, let him know.'

Henry rang Thompson, and said, 'That woman who threatened us all, and paid out the cash, she went to see Bella put a knife at her throat. Told her...'

'Slow down, slow down. I'll have a cop put outside your house plus an undercover at the Carrington so you can go to work safe. There's been some progress. Your boss was in jail, another man is going there.'

'Right, right, I...fuck this shit.'

'I know. Are you at home now?'

'Yes.'

'Stay there.'

Thompson rang Steele, asked for the cop at Henry and Bella's, a uniform. Plus, an undercover at the Carrington. He got both. He had a reason for it now.

Carter knocked on the front door of Al-Abadi's unit in Leichhardt. He heard the big man walk to the door. There was a fisheye so a moment's hesitation before he opened the door, and said, 'Mr. Thompson, to what do I owe the honor?'

Carter would like to have put a big wad of money on him saying something twattish like that.

'Can I come in?'

'Certainly.' He opened the door wide, a flourish of his hand indicating Thompson should follow him. He did. They went to the lounge. Thompson sat in an armchair. Al-Abadi stood at the mantelpiece. Thompson said, 'You don't want to sit?'

'I've been sitting down all day.'

'Why the fuck didn't you tell me you were a member of New Light Church?'

Al-Abadi looked shocked then came the quick recovery.

'You didn't ask.'

'You knew that Wayne was a member. That Norton, the fat man, who visited him was also a member. You know how the fuck Wayne died and I'm guessing you know where and when Norton died, right?'

Al-Abadi put his hand into the front pocket of his brown cords, took out a white handkerchief, wiped his brow, asked, 'Am I in trouble?'

'I don't know what it is with you cunts from that church. But you're all only concerned with yourselves, your fucken spirituality. You fucken stink, every last one of you. Now, I'll ask you once more. Do you know where and when Mr. Norton died?'

'No.'

'No, that's it.'

'I want a lawyer.'

Carter stood up, walked straight at Al-Abadi, and said, 'You fucken gutless, prick. Do you know Sally Bois? Did you help kill Wayne Hampton?'

'I want a lawyer.'

Cash hit him hard in his flabby stomach, grabbed his ear, twisted it, and said, 'Did you know Norton?'

Al-Abadi dropped to his knees as Thompson kept twisting his ear harder and harder.

'Jesus, that hurts, you're hurting me ah...'

'Did you know Norton?'

'Yes, yes, stop it.'

Thompson knelt behind him, hit him in the kidneys a few times, the big man groaned, tears came to his eyes. Thompson said, 'Did you help kill, Wayne?'

'No, no, I could never do that.'

'What could you do? What have you done?'

Thompson hit him again in the kidneys, there would be no sign of his brutality, grabbed what was left of Al-Abadi's hair, jerked him back, and said, 'Answer me.'

'I knew Norton. I told you that. Nothing else. Nothing else.'

'Take a few breaths, Mr. Al-Abadi, then we start again but worse, you follow me?'

'I...what d'you you want to know. Please, I can't stand this violence, please.'

'Did you go to the Carrington Motel? Have sex with young boys and girls with your pal, Norton, and the other cronies from New Light?'

Al-Abadi hesitated, Thompson hit him again, grabbed his ear again,

'Aaaah, no, I mean yes, I was, I did. I did.'

'Were they underage?'

'I don't know. I honestly don't know. I was stoned or drunk, they were young but not underage. They knew what they were doing there was no coercion of any...'

Thompson hit him a few more times for the joy of it. This prick tells him what those people felt or knew, those young boys or girls. How the fuck could he know what they felt?

'Get up. Stand up.'

Al-Abadi got up. Rolled his head around, and said, 'I want a lawyer. I know you're an honest policeman so you know I should have one that...'

'Shut the fuck up. Turn around, hands behind your back.' Al-Abadi did so. Thompson cuffed him and said, 'I'm taking you to Kings Cross Station to charge you. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

Thompson pushed him to the front door, opened the deadlock with the keys that were in the lock, pushed him outside. Al-Abadi said, 'I need my wallet, my...'

'You don't need anything. I'll call Abbott for you myself.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SALLY BOIS CALLED BILLY HASSAN.

'The girl's name is Rhia.'

'Rhia?'

'Yeah, you need anything else while I'm here.'

'No, but make sure she knows not to...'

'She knows alright.'

'Great work.'

'Thank you, Billy.'

'Take some time now, go home, make sure you watch out for that guy who hit Zlatan. I'm trying to find out who he is through his number plate and rego, asking for favors. We'll get him.'

'Bring him on, I say.'

'Alright, Sally, go home like I said, relax unless Abbott needs you.'

Hassan ended the call. He was in his small office above the strip club, looking onto what he referred to as Junkie Lane. He could see the tips of spent orange syringes lying amongst broken glass, toilet paper, a tablespoon glinted in the hot sun.

Billy Hassan called down to Ivan one of his spruikers, on the street, outside the club.

He answered, 'Boss.'

'Andrew, what time is Milo working?'

'Ten pm.'

'Tell him to come straight up and see me in the office when he gets here.'

'Yes, boss.'

Milo had worked in clubs, bars, and strip clubs on the dirty half-mile for a quarter of a century. He knew and saw everything. A reformed smack addict, now cigarette junkie and big drinker who knew all the girls, all the regular men, who had died, who survived, where they were now, how long they were going to last. He saw it right on the street every single night and day, even when he was on the gear, for twenty-five years. If anyone knew who Rhia was, Milo would.

Don Talbot was standing at the front desk of Kings Cross Police Station when Thompson came in with Al-Abadi. Both knew each other through reputation and they met once a while back at a piss-up for cops in a Surry Hills pub. Talbot 'Cash Thompson.'

'Mr. Talbot, sir.'

'What have we got here?'

Thompson said, 'One Mr. Al-Abadi of New Light Church fame. One of the men who used the Carrington for assignations with young folk who according to Mr. Al-Abadi knew what they were doing and were not under pressure to *perform*, so to speak.'

Al-Abadi hung his head low, but he still thought he would get out of this mess. Abbott would come, lawyers would come, there was nothing concrete. Thompson had no evidence, or he would have

played the cards. Laid them all out. One after the other. The staff at the motel were the problem. Could they ID him? How old were those kids and where had they come from? Who had provided them he thought and hung his head a bit lower, ashamed of himself for what he had done.

Talbot said, 'What should I charge him with?'

'Put him in a cell. I'll have a think about it but probably obstructing justice regarding the Wayne Hampton murder in that he withheld evidence and information that could lead police to solve the murder.'

Al-Abadi gasped out loud, and said 'shit' under his breath, then,

'A lawyer. I want a lawyer. I need you to call Mr. Abbott, he'll get me a lawyer.'

'Come this way,' Talbot said as he came from around the desk. Pushed Al-Abadi gently along from behind, guiding him through a door, down to a cell with his hands on the handcuffs around his wrists.

Thompson sighed. He had enough to charge him. He had photographed him at the Church yesterday. Plus, he had admitted, although under duress, that he knew the whole game at the Carrington. He'd keep his mouth shut when a lawyer came, though. Maybe Thompson and a sharp prosecutor provided by Steele could get him to make a deal, incriminate the real problem in Abbott and all the others in that shitty little church of theirs.

Thompson sat down in the foyer of the cop shop, rang Steele, filled him in. Steele saying at the end.

'So much for softly, softly.'

'That was never going to be the way with this one.'

'I have some good news,' Steele said.

'Oh yeah,'

'The tech guys got the calls from Norton's phone.'

'What? Fuck.'

'He called the same mobile number three times before he died in the motel at three am.'

'Has to be the girl.'

'Here's the number.'

Steele read it out to Thompson who took out a small notepad, jotted the mobile number down.

'Thanks, Steele. This is it. I'll get back to you when there's more. Put your top prosecutor on Al-Abadi. Deal for Abbott that's the goal.'

He ended the call. Adjusted his mobile so that his number showed when he rang Rhia. He didn't want to spook her by hiding it. He punched in the numbers. It started ringing. Three, four times and on and on and rang out. He tried again, three four, five times it rang and then it answered,

'Hello.'

'Rhia?'

'Who is this?'

'My name is Carter, you remember me?'

'No, no I don't? I'm not working anymore so you should lose my number.'

'I was hoping we could meet.'

'No. I'm not working anymore. My number is changing tomorrow, so sorry.'

'I'm Carter Thompson. People call me Cash, you remember me, don't you, from a while back. I was drinking a lot and you were kind to me.'

'I'm sorry. I have to go, bye.'

'I'm an investigator. I know what happened in the motel. I can help you Rhia, people are going to come for you, you're in trouble.'

Big trouble. I can help.'

Silence.

Rhia was in the backyard of the apartment, smoking, she bit her lip. She remembered him. She knew he had turned his life around. She kind of kept track of him without him knowing. Not too many Aboriginal cops out there and he had told her a lot of things, a lot of stuff.

'Rhia?'

'I know who you are. I remember. I've been keeping track of you.'

'How?'

'You had a couple of big cases in the paper, TV, and stuff.'

'You need to let me help you.'

'I can't, sorry. This will all be over tomorrow, anyway. New mobile number, new life.'

'I can help you, make sure...'

'Make sure, what? I end up in the paper, on the news, the hooker who was in bed with that man when he died. All the things that happened in that motel.'

'You know about that?'

'Of course, you think I'm stupid.'

'Tell me where you are. I can help...'

The call ended.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CARTER THOMPSON OPENED THE FRONT DOOR TO HIS BONDING APARTMENT.

Tired.

Needing sleep.

It was 10 pm.

Milo was arriving for his nightshift, spruiking at the strip club.

Ari was driving a different car. A blue BMW that looked at home in the area, parked about three hundred meters from Bois' place in North Bondi. He wore a jaunty cap, sat low in the seat. A humid, steamy, Monday night in suburbia but if Bois was going out, she had to go past him.

Rhia and Salem were drinking cold beer at the kitchen table. Molly and Jim Wenders were watching a DVD of Rio Bravo sitting on the couch. Molly hadn't fallen asleep yet. Jim was explaining stuff to her about the movie, why he liked it so much.

Thompson thought he should ring his wife and daughter but he didn't. He went to the cupboard, got the coffee tin down. Went through the rigmarole of getting the bag of speed, laid out three lines, did them fast. He rang Aimee. Arranged to pick her up at her place in Newtown.

He went down to his car, started it, looked around for people who might be following him, saw nothing. Drove up to Old South Head Road, turned left onto it, keep checking the mirror. He knew Zlatan wasn't coming back on his own after the beating he took from Ari, but Billy Hassan was connected to this, so there might be more coming. There was no one now. He made Oxford Street in good time, thought about his conversation with Rhia earlier. She was running. But how and when? She was scared but she had a plan too. Was she alone? He rang Talbot at Kings Cross police station hoping he would still be there. He was.

'What can I do for you, Cash?'

'A girl named Rhia was in the motel room with Norton. You ever heard of a working girl with that name? You recall her ever being up on charges? She's a sex worker, probably advertises in the usual rags, maybe gets the occasional John on the street.'

'I don't know her. But I'll check with the uniform guys. There's a guy named Matt Taylor who has worked at this station for the past ten or fifteen years, not ambitious at all, that's why he's still in

uniform but has good relations at street level with the fucken perverts and shit heads who run around here.'

'That would be great.'

'Your man is still in a cell. Abbott is coming, just not yet.'

'Thanks, let me know what Abbott says. This is two of his guys in two days. He'll be getting pissed off but that's the general idea.'

'Will do.'

'See ya, Talbot.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MILO STOOD OUTSIDE OF THE STEEL DOOR IN FRONT OF BILLY HASSAN'S office. Knowing that his boss watched everyone who walked up to or past his door on CCTV. A few minutes went past. He stood patiently waiting, forgoing the cigarette he wanted. His face was pockmarked, smoke-aged with deep lines like ex-Victorian Premier, Jeff Kennett. He wore black pants, a long sleeve shirt. Not so different from the thirty-year veteran waiters at the famous Bourbon and Beefsteak Bar that was on the corner of Darlinghurst Road and MacLeay Street, opposite the fountain. Only he served up sex and vice in all the various and wide definitions that inhabited a strip club on the dirty-half-mile. A master at dragging the buck's night group into the strip club. *First drink free, guys*, was the kicker. Only it didn't include top shelf and was watered down Fosters from the filthy taps and each drink after that was so damn expensive it would send a third world country broke. But once they were in, they were in.

The door opened. Hassan said, 'Come in, Milo.'

Gave him a bear hug when he was inside, returned by Milo, Hassan rubbed his back, and said, 'My friend, my friend.'

Milo coughed. Hassan walked around his desk, found the comfortable chair, and said, 'Sit, sit.'

Milo sat down. Hassan smiled at him and said, 'Do you know a girl called Rhia? A sex worker. Maybe from the street. Maybe an escort.'

'Rhia, yep. I do.'

Hassan laughed, and said, 'My friend, your knowledge is a gift.'

'I don't know about that shit, but I remember her. She worked on the street but not for very long. She met a guy, his name, his name, shit. He was a trickster, yeah, um.'

Then Milo scratched his head. 'No, that's not what they call them.' He looked at his boss. 'A computer trickster?'

'A hacker.'

'Yeah, fucken yeah, a hacker, he did some soft time. Heard he didn't like it much, stuffed up his nerves but, shit, I haven't heard of Rhia for a long time. I know her because she told me if I found tricks for her she'd give me a commission. I got a few. She made me promise no junkies, no wild men, old guys she liked, softer the better. You know the type, creep in and out of the clubs on their own.'

'And now?'

'Like I said, boss. Don't know. Been a long time. I know she liked a slice at the pizza shop by the taxi stand. I don't know. Let me ask around. I can find her for sure. Is there a ...'

'You find her, Milo. You get an address or a mobile. You find her, you'll get some big spending money for your Surfer's Paradise holiday.'

'I'll find her boss. Not me, personally, you understand. I may have to splash some cash, you following me, boss.'

'How much?'

'Five, six hundred, I reckon.'

Hassan opened the top drawer of his desk, reached in, took an envelope out. Counted out three hundred. Put the envelope away.

'There's three hundred in there. I need to know the minute, the second you find out, you got me.'

'Yep, boss.'

'One other thing. The duty manager at that shithole across the road, the Carrington, that's where I got her name in a round-about way. But the cops know him now. There have been some arrests, you can't go in strongarm, the police have an undercover cop in there now. Maybe you can have a chat with him when he has a cigarette or leaves for home. There's heat on him now. Strong heat.'

'Got it, boss. Got it.'

Thompson rang Aimee from the car, she came down dressed in a tight black skirt that hugged her figure, her arse to be precise, hugged her thighs. But she moved freely, it was comfortable too. She wore black boots with silver buckles that went up to mid-calf, a white dress shirt with black buttons up the middle of it. Her hair was slick and wet. Her cat's eyes gleamed. He was in love with her in that instant as she took the last step down from the apartment stairs to the footpath looking like a fashion model. He wished he had taken a photo of her. She opened the car door, eased herself in and said, 'What a gentleman you are?'

'It's easier though and...'

'Relax, Cash.'

'Maybe, I will. You look amazing.'

'That's what they all say,' she said, laughed, leaned over, kissed him on the cheek.

He smiled at her, and said, 'I think I love you.'

'Cash, don't say that. Not unless you mean it.'

'Hmm, you still look great, though.'

'Thank you, baby. I got some shots done today for my Instagram debut.'

'You were serious?'

'Yep.'

'How does it work? How much do you take off?'

She laughed,

'Men, that's what it's all about. That's why I'm going to make money.'

He shrugged. He didn't understand whether she was serious or not, but the speed made him not give a shit. He wanted only to be with her and said, 'What d'you you want to do?'

'Go to a nice bar.'

'There's a cocktail bar on Victoria Street. On the top floor of the Top of the Town Hotel. You can see the whole city, the harbor, everything. It used to be a Japanese Restaurant.'

'I'm in.'

'Great, they have parking underneath.'

'How's your latest case?'

'You don't want to know.'

'What? Why?'

'I told you about the guy who died in the motel.'

'Yep.'

'He worked for New Light Church and...'

'Oh, I've heard of them, they're huge. They have all...'

'Aimee, let me be clear. They are lowlifes. The worst kind of people you would ever meet.'

'Oh.'

Fueled by the speed, he told her everything. All the dirty little details, in the car, up in the lift, in a quiet corner of the cocktail bar where they could see all the lights of the city glittering for them. He told all about New Light. All about the case. Told her all about the other cases he had worked on. Aimee sat, listened, drank cocktail after cocktail. She was fascinated and disgusted in equal measure. He told her she couldn't tell anyone about all these things. She nodded, listened as he talked on and on into the small hours of the next day.

In the elevator on the way down to the car park, Cash turned, held her face, kissed her passionately, she kissed him back hard, full of desire, he reached down and pulled her skirt up, higher and higher. Put his hand over her panties, left it there for a while as the elevator went down, ninth floor, then slipped his hand inside, felt her slick wetness, found her clit, rubbed it in small little circles as she held onto his shoulders harder and harder. Down they went from nine to eight. The doors opened. He froze for a moment. Over his shoulder, she could see a middle-aged couple standing there, she laughed, he turned his head, the couple stepped back, the doors closed, they both laughed. He put his finger on the button again, she sighed, small circles, her head feeling light. Down to seven, six. With his free hand, he pulled down her underwear below her bum, squeezed it hard while he kept playing with her. Her breathing had become rapid. They were on floor, three, two, ground. She held him tight, then the lift stopped in the basement, she said in a whisper,

'Don't stop, keep going, keep going.'

He did. He kissed her face, her mouth. She breathed faster, faster, grabbed his cock through his trousers. He kept touching her slowly, expertly, she bit into his shoulder as he did, holding his hard cock. He continued moving his finger over and around her clit, she moved her legs further apart, she grabbed at his belt, his pants dropped to the floor, she felt his cock through his underwear, pulled it out. She leaned back. He entered her slowly, still, with his finger working slowly around in circles, she breathed harder and harder, he started stroking his cock in and out of her. She held him tighter, came hard, groaning out loud. He kept going faster and faster, she gripped his shoulders hard, he came, slipped over at the same time. They both collapsed onto the floor of the elevator, clothes skew-whiff, satiated, laughing at each other.

They both stopped. Held each other for a few a minutes or so.

She said to him, 'Jesus, that was good.'

'Only good?'

She laughed.

'Let's go home,' he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ON MONDAY NIGHT, MILO TAPPED UP HIS USUAL SUSPECTS BUT CAME UP WITH nothing about Rhia other than she was seen sitting on the step at the pizza place near the taxi rank eating a slice maybe last Thursday or Friday. That she walked off afterward towards the hospital.

The duty manager hadn't been at work and as Hassan said, it wasn't safe to go in asking questions now. He lit a cigarette, standing inside the front door of the strip club at 6 am, not happy that he hadn't found her. The street outside was dirty, barely a car or motorbike moved past. It was sticky hot, still twenty-eight Celsius, and he wanted to go home. He couldn't remember Rhia's boyfriend's name, but it would come to him. He poked his head out onto the street as a gay guy who used to work in the club walked by. Milo smiled, and said, 'Hey Mike, Mike.'

'Yeah, hey, Milo, I'm heading home.'

'You working at the Pink Pussy down the street?'

'Yeah, yeah.'

'How's it going?'

'Same old. I'm a gay guy performing with straight girls in a strip club.'

He was a together guy, Mike. He had cleaned up his act. He was a fit strong guy now. He had been a junkie of the worst kind but found God. Now, he never took a drink, never took drugs, nobody saw him much outside of work, except coming and going but he was friendly and polite to everyone. People liked him, and he, like, Milo, knew everyone. No one knew why he continued to do what he did. Mike did. It was a form of penance. He had to pay for his past life. He couldn't get a job anywhere anyhow, not with his past and his work history.

'Hey, Mike, you remember a street girl around here, didn't work on the street for too long, she met a guy.'

'Her name, Milo, her name?'

'Unusual name, Rhia.'

Mike smiled,

'Yeah, sure. I remember her, she was very sweet. I see her around here and there. She lives near me I think.'

'You know exactly where she lives?'

'No. I see her at the shops or walking her kid to school.'

'She has a kid?'

'Yeah.'

'You remember her boyfriend's name?'

'Yep, Salem I think.'

'You think?'

Mike started to get pissed off. He liked Rhia, she was nice, the kid was pretty. She had changed herself, done alright. He said, 'What's with the third degree, Milo? She's a good person, Rhia. Leave her alone. Don't bring her back down to street level.'

'Easy, Mike. I'm curious that's all. Her daughter she...'

But Mike had put his head down, kept walking. Something wasn't right about this, but Milo had some more information now.

He called Hassan, 'Milo, yeah. What is it?'

'Rhia has a daughter and she lives in Darlinghurst. Can't be that many primary schools in that suburb, she walks her to school sometimes.'

'How'd you find this out.'

'You remember, Mike, the junkie who used to work here?'

'Yes.'

'Had a quick chat with him just now but he knew something was wrong. He likes Rhia for some reason, but I don't think he knows her to talk too much, only sees her around. But he said the boyfriend's name is Salem.'

'Good work but I need you to stay a bit longer. I need you to go and see if she takes her kid to school. You know what she looks like, you know the boyfriend too.'

'I might get a couple of hours sleep out the back if that's ok, have a shower, then see if I can find her. Maybe you could goog...'

'I'll find the schools in the area. Start at the closest. Take Antony with you. Describe the girl to him. Let him go on foot. You take your car, go from school to school, around and around. Look out for the guy too. You got his name from Mike?'

'Yeah, Salem.'

'You say he did time in a prison farm?'

'Yep.'

'I know people in those jails. They know the guards, we'll find him.'

Rhia and Molly left home at 9 am, as Milo and Antony were giving up, going home. They walked with a couple of suitcases on wheels

to Kings Cross Station, caught the train to Town Hall, switched to the Parramatta Line, got off at Parramatta. Went to the bank. She withdrew 15k in cash under her new name, Miranda O'Donnell. Had no issues at the teller. Caught a taxi to the car yard. The salesmen had been told by Rhia they were coming but was still slightly surprised when they turned up. He took them through all the bullshit. What a great deal he was giving them. She had decided on a Hyundai I20 instead of the Mazda 3. It was less expensive but newer with fewer KMs on it. The salesman was even happier when she paid 8k in cash.

Molly was excited about getting in the new car. She had barely ever seen her mum drive except once when they hired a car to go to the Central Coast for a short holiday. She played with the radio, looking for a good station. Found a generic FM music station that played greatest hits. Rhia was happy. She liked driving. She loved the idea of never doing sex work ever again. She was scared too though, apprehensive about the future because of the people who might be coming after her. That cop Carter was nice, a decent guy but she didn't know where it would lead to. She couldn't go to jail; couldn't let Salem go back. He wouldn't make it, not again.

Salem walked to the local Asian grocer, bought some two-minute noodles, some sweet chili sauce. His go-to-comfort-food. At home, he started cleaning up the place. The owner had been good about them leaving. There was no lease but there had been a bond. They had never missed rent, always paid on time. Rhia was always scared of getting evicted because of what had happened with her and her mother. She would never let it happen to Molly. He was a

bit of a clean freak too. The opposite of Rhia and Molly, who both left a trail of destruction behind them. He was going to miss Jim Wenders. A lovely cranky old guy. He had seen a tear in the old man's eyes when he had to say his final goodbye to Molly and Rhia. Salem knew he would be alright. He was a tough old coot, but he might be lonely now too.

Billy Hasan slept in his office for four hours. He had a fold-out couch that turned into a comfortable bed. He showered, was at his desk by two pm. He started to make calls to ex-cons who had been in prisons farms. There were three farms dotted around the state

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

10 AM AT NEWTOWN, AIMEE'S PLACE. CASH THOMPSON REACHED FOR HIS mobile, which lay on the floor beside the double bed mattress, answered it.

'Yeah.'

'This is Tony Wu from The Star.'

'What d'you you want?'

'You working the Norton, Wayne Hampton case?'

'Connected, are they?'

'I don't have time to dance, Thompson. You know that today, Abbott is announcing his three candidates for the Senate half-term elections?'

'No. I...go on.'

'You heard about the balance of power?'

'Go on.'

'These three candidates get up they could be deciding the fate of the nation on everything from immigrant workers to the captain of the test team, you get it?'

'Listen, Wu. I don't have a story for you, not yet but I will. Be patient, it's coming. Write whatever you like about me, but Abbott and his kind are...'

'I know what they are. Need to prove it.'

'Alright, like I said, be patient.'

'If you say so.'

Thompson ended the call. He was pissed at himself for sleeping in. He had shit to do. He tried to prioritize in his mind the plan for the day. Couldn't. Aimee wasn't in bed. He heard her in the kitchen. Got up, pulled on his underwear, went to see her. She smiled as he walked bare-chested into the kitchen, and said, 'Hello, lover.'

'Coffee?'

'Strong flat white, right?'

'You could have been a waitress.'

'Funny that.'

'I'll have a shower.'

He turned to walk out of the kitchen, she put her arms around him, hugged him tight, he went slack in her arms, she turned him around, kissed him, backed him up against the wall. They kissed. She slipped both hands into his underwear, slid them down, kept kissing him slowly, gently, he liked it, smiled in his head, she bent down, kissed his chest, slowly knelt down, kissed his stomach, looked up at him, he sighed.

He was at home now. How could he find Rhia? He rang Jill Anderson at the council.

'Not my favorite person Mr. Thompson.'

'I get results, Jill. I had to stop someone else from seeing that...'

'What can I do for you?'

'Is it possible to find someone in your council records with a first name only?'

'No.'

'To the point.'

'Simple question.'

'Bye, Mr. Thompson.'

He rang the Wentworth Courier, spoke to an easily impressed employee by the name of Anna. Explained who he was, what he wanted, which was information about a sex worker ad, someone who used the name Rhia. The employee searched but couldn't find anyone. She wouldn't use her real names in the ad. He thanked her, then had an idea. Walked down to his car. Drove to the library in Bondi Junction.

He went to the magazine racks. Found a shelf that held the last few week's copies. The paper was huge for selling real estate, so it wasn't unusual for back copies to be there. He looked through them, sometimes they had photos, sometimes not. He couldn't find anyone that seemed like it might be Rhia. Couldn't find her mobile number in the first few he looked at. Then he found it. The same number that Norton had called. The one he found from the tech guys.

He called Anna at the Wentworth Courier again, gave her the number, she searched. There was a credit card number. She read it out to Thompson. But there was no address. Only the mobile number and the credit card. He rang Steele, hyped up now, he was close. Steele would contact the bank. He would get the address. He was close, very close now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

HASSAN FOUND OUT SALEM HAD BEEN IN THE PRISON FARM NEAR WOLLONGONG. When he had got out. Who his parole officer was? A guy named Peter Ditko. He didn't know the parole guy. Had no connection to get to him anyway. But he did have connections in the police who might find him. He rang these people and found that a Detective named Cossack might help him. He rang Cossack who told him he would need a favor.

'What kind of favor?'

'I have a drink most evenings, around 6 pm at the Courthouse Hotel in Taylor Square, you know it?'

'Yes.'

'I'll have an address for this bloke. You meet me there. Buy me a few drinks, bring a paper. I read *The Star*. Put some fish and chips in it. Hand it over. You'll get the information.'

'How much are fish and chips these days?'

'Four figures for sure.'

'What time? How will I know you?'

'Black leather jacket, red shirt. 6 pm.'

Hassan said.

'Won't be me. Sally Bois will meet you.'

'Good to know.'

Abbott was at the microphone in that purpose-built entertainment center of his in Bondi Junction. The place was full of the usual congregation types but there was a huge media presence also. People understood the power equation here. Abbott had already introduced Sheila Watson and Bruce Jamieson. Watson was a businesswoman. On the board of one of the big four banks, also a Rugby League club, many charities. Blond, Teutonic, full of energy. Jamieson was an amiable shuffler type, pats on the back to mates, everyone was his mate, *I can help you with that mate*, was his calling card, male or female. Did 'something' in finance, bought and sold buildings and people, and so on. Great guy. Gave good speeches. Shook a lot of hands. Stood for nothing except his own interest and now Abbott's. You kiss my arse; I'll kiss yours.

Tony Wu was in the second from the front row. He asked for a ticket and got this seat. Abbott hoping, he might see the light, write positive things about this little shindig of his with five-or-six hundred hangers-on panting and fawning on whoever they met or shook hands with. Abbott was introducing the third and last candidate.

'Friends and others,' Abbott cocked an eyebrow seen large on the big screen (a gentle laugh around the room). 'The next and final candidate for our charge to the Senate half-term elections is a man prepared to do anything for the glory of God. He has proved that time and time again. He was a sensation on the sporting fields of this country. Now a success off the field with his huge financial services company *Bricks and Mortar*. You want something done. Bobby Hughes gets it done. You want to get around all that

bureaucratic rigmarole, Bobby Hughes can get it done. He charged through defenses on the football field, now he charges through life, creating jobs, infrastructure, freeways, electric cars, financial advice for the small and large in business. Ladies and gentlemen, friends, I give you former East Sydney superstar Bobby Hughes.'

Rapturous applause from the people in the cheap and expensive seats. Wu was amazed at the passion, the joy in the people. This truly is a religious experience for some of these people. Standing out of their seats now, clapping loudly. Bobby Hughes walks on stage, handsome, thick, wavy brown hair, black suit, red tie, straight-backed, beaming, waving his hands in the air. Abbott, the smaller man, reaches for his candidate's right hand, pulls it up into the air, the crowd clapping louder and louder. Hughes bows then shakes Abbott's hand vigorously, makes his way to the microphone.

Bois went to her garden shed to pick up something she needs, gets in her car, turns the ignition on, drives out of the underground car park. Heads in the direction of Old South Head Road. Ari waits, watches her go past, takes his time following her. By the time they hit Syd Enfield Drive, he is five or six cars behind her. She listens to some New Light Church soft rock, sings along softly, she has a job to do here. She's concentrating on what she's going to do. If she gets this part right then Thompson won't have a case. It will be over. She has three parts to this job. She stops at a 7-11 on Oxford Street in Paddington, buys a copy of The Star.

She parks on Denham Street takes out from her glovebox an envelope with two-thousand dollars, puts it inside the paper, gets out. Feels the afternoon heat on her back. She wears black CK

jeans, a black T-shirt, black Docs on her feet. Walks towards the Courthouse Hotel. This detective. This policeman who is supposed to be protecting us, she thinks, is selling information to the highest bidder but in this case, it is for a good cause, the right cause, the Church, so she forgives him before they meet.

Ari follows her on foot but doesn't go into the hotel. He sits out the front on a bench waiting for her. His cap pulled tight over his bald head. Wearing baggy jeans, a billowing dark blue T-shirt. It is steamy once again, dark clouds are building, the warning signs of a thunderstorm in the air.

Bois sees the black leather jacket, red shirt, leaning on the bar, a foot on the rail that runs around the bottom of the bar. The Courthouse Hotel was one of those places that every section of society whatever the fuck type person could drink at and not be worried about fitting in. Everyone came here. She had the paper in her right hand. Sat down, and said, 'I'm Bois.'

'I'm Dick Tracy.'

'Hi, Dick.'

'Beer?'

'Yeah, a schooner of New.'

He motioned to the barman who came over,

'Two schooners of New.'

'Here's the paper you wanted.'

He took it gently, put an extra fold in it, put it in the inside pocket of his shiny black leather jacket. He looked like something out of *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*. That was exactly the look he was going for.

'Thanks, Bois. Your boss, he's pretty keen on this guy.'

'Mind your own business about what my boss wants.'

'Touché, Miss Bois. This is the address.'

He slowly told her what it was, repeated it once again, slowly then said, 'Now, why don't you drink your beer then get the fuck out of here.'

They sat there, side by side, not talking, detesting each other until the beers were done and then Bois left, the detective stayed on, bought another beer.

Ari watched her leave, waited.

She got into her car, called Billy Hassan, told him the address, he thanked her and told her, 'Keep going. Get this thing done, quickly, efficiently.'

She rang Abbott, told him what was going on. He was still at the function, and said, 'Miss Bois, thank you for the call. Keep me informed until the end.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SHE DROVE TO THE ADDRESS THE DETECTIVE HAD GIVEN HER. TOOK OUT THE secateurs she had gone to the garden shed for. Reached into the glovebox, retrieved chloroform in a dark bottle, a handkerchief. Put the secateurs in her back pocket. Put black leather gloves on. Walked to the small gate at the front of the twin apartment block where Salem and Rhia lived. Opened it. Walked up to the front door, rang the doorbell. Salem was watching her on his little laptop, on the CCTV. He had set up at the front door a few days ago. He didn't know her. Wasn't going to answer the door to anyone. But it put a chill up his spine. This person he didn't know. The military look of her. He put some headphones on, listened to some favorite music, sat in the kitchen, checked again, she went away. He breathed a sigh of relief, kept listening to the music in the kitchen.

Ari was watching from his car.

Bois walked around the back, found the lane. Knew she could get in via the back lane into the garden up the back steps. She had an electronic master key tool, similar to the one Thompson had used to get into Leichhardt, to Wayne Hampton's place. Thompson was at home, waiting for a call from Steele. Bois opened the gate, quietly slipped into the backyard. Rhia was in the car, driving to

Albury where she had booked a small garden Airbnb apartment. She would be there in half an hour, would call Salem when she arrived. Make sure everything was good. Bois felt her mobile buzzing in her jeans pocket, turned quickly, walked back out the gate.

Abbott was on the other end of her mobile.

'Sally, money is missing. The hacker must have the USB. A lot of money is gone.' He sounded pissed off, distressed. 'Mrs. Norton called me earlier. You have another job now, retrieve that USB, find the girl, then Les Connor, we're cleaning everything up today, for the Church, for our congregation, for our candidates.'

It stirred Bois, standing out in the back lane. It focused her even more. She said, 'I think Billy Hassan may be a problem too. He supplied some of your people with young men and women, maybe underage, maybe not. I knew he was laundering money for you but...'

'You think he would turn against me? Against us?'

'I'm not sure but I doubt he'd want to do jail time. If Thompson can find the young people or the staff at the Carrington testify, even just one of them. It could be trouble, which it looks like they might, with the undercover police there now. Something to think about.'

'Thank you, Sally. Now, back to work. God needs you; he needs this done.'

'Thy will be done,' she said.

Abbott ended the call.

She had the chloroform spray with her. She held it in one hand as she went back in through the gate, slowly, gently walking on the lawn. There was a downstairs flat that shared the yard, she didn't see any movement of the Venetian blinds, heard nothing. She climbed the back steps. Looked in, couldn't see anyone but the TV was on. She put the tool to work. It worked swiftly, noiselessly, she

entered through the back door, walked slowly to the lounge. Saw Salem nodding his head to the music, his headphones on. Bois walked quickly into the kitchen, Salem looked up, she rushed at him, he was unprepared, she held him, put the handkerchief over his mouth as she had done to Wayne Hampton, held it there until he went limp.

She tied him to the cushioned kitchen chair, waited for ten minutes. Ari was outside, trying to work out how to get in. Salem slowly came around. His eyes adjusting to the light, he had a gag in his mouth. She waited another five minutes until he realized his situation. Ari was at the back door, trying the lock, it was open. He slowly turned the metal doorknob. Edged his way in.

Bois took the gag out, and said to Salem.

'I'm from New Light Church, you know what that means don't you?'

Salem processed it, thought about the guy who was crucified, he nodded, and said, 'Rhia's gone. The USB is gone.'

Ari heard him say it, edged slowly into the lounge.

Bois took the secateurs from her back pocket, and said, 'How many fingers do you want to lose?'

Salem screamed at the top of his voice,

'Jim! Jim!'

It shocked Bois. She didn't know who the fuck Jim was. She thought Salem would be too groggy. She put her gloved hand over his mouth, twisted his neck around, whispered in his ear,

'Shut-the-fuck-up-now. I mean it.'

Jim Wenders was doing his weekly shop at Woolworths in Kings Cross.

Ari charged into the room, running full pelt at Bois, dived at her, knocked all of them to the floor. He grabbed Bois by her right wrist,

she stuck the secateurs into his midriff. It punctured his skin, the edge of the blade went right in. He winced, turned away quickly. Bois jabbed the secateurs at his face, got him in the eye, blinding him momentarily. He staggered back holding his eye. Salem lay on the floor of the kitchen, winded badly, too badly to yell. Ari took a blackjack from his back pocket, came at Bois head-on, but his eye was bleeding. He was off kilter; she was superfast. She sidestepped him, kneed him in the balls, hard, he bulldozed her to the ground, falling on top of her but her hands were free. She stabbed the secateurs into his side again, ripping open his flesh. 'Ah, bitch, fucken bitch,' he said as he rolled away in pain. She got up, kicked him in the head a few times with her Doc Martin boots. Held the secateurs high in her hand. He rolled further away, tried to get up but the wounds in his side stopped him, tried again, made it up. Stood shakily, blood oozed from both wounds. Bois simply watched him, and said nothing. His eye bleeding horribly too. She came at him fast again, he threw a last-ditch big right hand that clipped her head, rocked her back but she recovered quickly. Ari stood, hands by his side, getting balanced, she was too fast though, kicked him in the balls twice, he collapsed, she shoved the secateurs into his back, his neck, he turned into a ball to protect himself. Still thinking, he could get out of it. She jabbed the secateurs into the back of his neck two, three times. He groaned, tried to yell but couldn't. Salem watched appalled. She stabbed his head, his neck, building to a frenzy, she stabbed him in the eye again, he opened up, defeated, lay on his back, she thrust the secateurs into his neck, destroying his jugular vein. Blood spurted out of his neck and his head lolled back.

He died.

Simple as that.

Bois looked at him, smiled to herself. Fat cunt could take some punishment.

Salem had his eyes closed laying on the floor, trying to get his breathing under control, wondering if he could get out of this. He heard Bois say,

'Now it's your turn, my friend.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

STEELE RANG THOMPSON. READ OUT THE DARLINGHURST ADDRESS OF RHIA and Salem, and said, 'I cross-checked the address with all the agencies. Salem Houston lives there too. He did time in a Wollongong Prison Farm for guess what?'

'Tell me,' Thompson said as he headed for his car.

'Hacking.'

'Shit. I'm going there now. Fast as I can.'

When he got to the front door of the apartment, he rang the bell several times, but no one answered, not a sound inside. He, like Bois before him, found the back lane, went up the back stairs. Saw the back door open, drew his weapon, slowly climbed the stairs. Edged his way in slowly, could hear a mewling sound, it wasn't loud, he wondered if it was a cat or dog. He reached the kitchen, saw his friend lying on the ground, a hole in his neck, wounds all over his head.

Dead.

Blood everywhere.

He hoped there was DNA here.

Thompson slid down the kitchen wall, lit a cigarette, drew the smoke in deeply, blew it straight out in front of him, sighed. Forgot

about the other sound for a few minutes. Looked at his friend, wanted to scream or cry out but didn't. Finished the cigarette. He would not spare Bois. Heard the soft mewling again.

He willed himself into the bathroom from where the sound came. Salem was in the bathtub, a huge scroll of toilet paper around his left hand, blood everywhere here too.

He looked at Thompson who said,

'Salem?'

Salem was shaking like he was naked on a two degrees winter's night. Shaking, crying, he said

'I didn't tell her. I didn't tell her.'

'Didn't tell her what?'

'I didn't tell her. I didn't tell her,'He repeated.

Thompson saw the tops of three fingers, thrown haphazardly into the bath. Knew what had taken place. The boy was in shock. He called an ambulance. Waited with him, talked to him, got into the bath with him put his arm around his shoulder. He tried to ask him things about what happened but he had stopped talking, kept shaking, leaned his head on Thompson's shoulder.

Thompson made another call.

'Mr. Kholi, I have another one for you.'

Rhia called Salem but a woman answered,

'Hello.'

'I want to talk to Salem.'

'The time for talking is over,' Bois said. 'We want the USB. We want our money back.'

'I want to talk to Salem.'

'Too late for that.'

Rhia ended the call.

'Oh, shit,' she said softly, 'not Salem, not like that.'

She had Thompson's mobile number in her head. Memorized for this exact scenario. But she waited. Waited a whole hour. Scared her call would be traced.

She called him.

'Thompson here,' he said huskily.

'This is Rhia.'

'Where are you?'

'Is he alive?'

'Yes, he's alive. He's been taken to hospital. There'll be a uniformed cop at the door of his room. Nothing else can happen to him.'

'What did they do to him?'

'He's fine. More mental than anything, he'll recover the doctors said. I'll see him tomorrow, see if he'll talk.'

She ended the call. He was safe. He was alive. That was something.

She woke up Molly, packed quickly, got in the car, and drove. They would be in Melbourne in three hours. It was a big city, she could get lost there, lose anyone coming for her, for both of them.

Thompson took another call. This time from Steele.

'Les Connor is dead.'

'What?'

'Got a call from Kings Cross Police. Anonymous tip-off to them. Two detectives went there. He was dead, head lolled back on the sofa, sitting up, a puncture wound in his neck. Pro job.

'Bois, cleaning everything up,' Thompson said.

Ended the call.

The ambulance came, took the shaking kid away.

Mr. Kholi and his crew arrived. Kholi shook his head, he didn't know Ari, and said to Thompson 'What happened here?'

'Part of the New Light Church package deal. He's a friend of mine, treat him with respect if you can. I know who did it. Anything you can find to identify her would be good.'

'Her?'

'Yep, her.'

CHAPTER THIRTY

BOIS HADN'T SEEN ANY NEED TO TERMINATE SALEM, HE HAD GIVEN HER WHAT she wanted. She was driving to Melbourne now. Salem had said Rhia and Molly were in a light blue I20 headed for Melbourne. For a new life. She had torn off three of his fingers with the secateurs. She had no reason not to believe him. He said she had only left a couple of hours before, so Bois decided to drive. Abbot knew people there too; they would be looking out for her. She didn't tell Billy Hassan. Abbott had told her he was out of the loop now. She ignored his calls to her mobile. The first time she had ever done that. He did not like it. Rang Abbott, who also ignored his calls. He had found the fucken bitch for them he thought, now they're cutting me loose. But it wasn't true. Abbott only wanted Bois as focused as possible.

Thompson called his wife, asked if he could see her and his daughter Rachel also if possible.

'Bad day, Carter?'

'Yeah, Ari is dead.'

A beat.

Two beats.

'I'm sorry, Carter. I know how much, er...I, come over, we'll both be here.'

'I'll be there in a couple of hours.'

Cash Thompson went to his car, started the engine, and said, 'Play Charlie Parker.'

All the Things You Are came through the speakers, he listened carefully trying to lose himself in the music, forget what he had seen. It didn't work. Where was Bois? Did she have the USB? Did she know where Rhia was? He kept driving to Potts Point. To the seen-better-days apartment block where Les Connor had the penthouse. Where he had moved up in the world to? Where he was killed. His wife still hiding away on the Central Coast. Another one playing to Abbott's tune.

There was no flunky on the desk today. Might have been organized he thought, in fact, definitely it had been organized. He went up in the lift. Crime scene tape was there, he stepped under it. The team had left. two uniform guys stood in the room, talking, joking. He said, 'Can I have the room, guys?'

They looked at each other, shrugged, they had been told to let him do anything.

'Don't go far,' he said. They went and stood outside the door.

He went to Les Connor. He was wearing a tennis shirt with an alligator on it. White shorts. His head as Steele had described it, lolled on the back of the sofa. The small puncture wound was obvious. He spent an hour going through the place, looking for what he wasn't sure? A trace of Bois. But there would be nothing. He knew that.

He found nothing.

Toxicology would tell him the poison. It mattered a lot. If he could trace the poison to Bois, it would be a strong link. Perhaps enough to charge her. He rang Kholi, told him to get the best people on earth onto it.

'This one's personal,' Kholi said.

'They all are, Mr. Kholi.'

'Of course, I'm sorry.'

Thompson left, drove to his wife's house in Paddington. She and his daughter shared a terrace house. There was a new lover, a younger man, but his wife knew not to put them in the same suburb, let alone the same house. He was a lawyer too. His name was Tom Gunstone. Thompson thought of him as 'square jaw.'

He wanted to go home, get some speed, find Bois, kill her.

His daughter answered the door.

'Hey, dad,' she said when she saw it was him. Opened the door wider, as he entered, she hugged him, he hugged her back a little less enthusiastically than she had hugged him. She didn't care, that was her dad. What he did. Kept people at a distance, everyone.

'Mum told me about your friend. I'm really sorry.'

'Thanks, Rachel, you're the best.'

She hugged him again. He stood there and let it happen. They walked through to the kitchen. His wife, ex-lover, sometimes best friend was cooking pasta, he said, 'Hi, Cassie. Smells good.'

'Gnocchi, your favorite, some mushrooms too, garlic, tomato-based sauce and...'

'Smells great.'

'Want to watch TV dad? While mum finishes up.'

'You're not going to help her, Rachel Not like you?'

'Very funny, dad. Come on. Um, I'm into this Japanese series called Midnight Diner, you'll love it. This Japanese chef owns this little diner in Tokyo. In a late-night area, where all the action is. All kinds of different people come through his diner. They tell like each person has a favorite meal and as he cooks their story unfolds...'

'OK, OK, sounds good. Let's go. You got me.'

He was thinking about Rhia, Steele had told him her daughter was eight years old. What kind of life were they going to have now? Where was Bois? What had Salem told her? Where was the USB?

He watched the Netflix series but took nothing in. His daughter talked at rapid speed about everything under the sun. He nodded, and said yes at what he thought were the appropriate times. Dinner was in the kitchen at the huge wooden table his wife had bought recently. It was worth a fortune that was all he knew. It was beautiful too. Long, clean, hard, with old knots in it. He said, 'You get the money, OK? I transferred it.'

'Yeah, I got it, thanks. I'm sorry. I was having a bad day. I know you are always good for it and...'

'It's ok, babe, really.'

She was always having a fucken bad day he thought. His mobile rang. It was Aimee.

'I got to take this, sorry.'

He walked down the long hallway back into the lounge room where he had been watching Midnight Diner. He said, 'It's good to hear your voice.'

'Thanks, Cash. Is it cool if I call you that? I like it so much.'

'It's cool. What are you doing?'

'Nothing. you wanna come over, go out?'

'Yeah, give an hour or so.'

'Where are you?'

'Dinner with my wife and daughter. Had to be done. Expected of me.'

'It's fine, so, um see you when you get here?'

'Yep.'

He went back into the kitchen, ate quickly, spent another half-an-hour up in his daughter's bedroom. She was playing cricket for a local team. Plus, Volleyball. She didn't mention going out or her boyfriends. He didn't ask her.

'Thanks for coming over, dad. I'm sorry about your friend.'

'Me too. Love you.'

He drove over to Bondi. Checked all the way home he wasn't being followed by Bois or anyone else. Got the coffee tin down. Did the business with the speed. Kept enough for another few lines later on. He would have to get some more. But Ari was gone now. He had other contacts. He drove to Newtown, checking all the way there again for anyone following him. He got out of the car, walked up the stairs to her small apartment, thinking he would like to go to bed with her the minute he got into the apartment, stay with her there all night. It would be the best kind of medicine.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

IN THE MORNING, THOMPSON DROVE TO ST VINCENT'S HOSPITAL. WAS TOLD Salem was under sedation but could talk, had calmed down a lot but was still fragile mentally. Found Salem's room. Showed his ID to the uniform cop on the door and asked, 'Anyone else been in here?'

'No.'

'Anyone else ask to get in?'

'A guy around fifty, well dressed, came in last night. I got it drilled into me, you were the only one allowed in but this guy, he kept at me, but I didn't let him in.'

'Was he short, a little beard?'

'Yep, that's him. I felt like I knew him from somewhere.'

'Right, thanks.'

Abbott, the fucken prick, Thompson thought.

Cunt never gives up.

Salem had his eyes closed, his hands outside of the sheets and blanket by his side. Carter Thompson sat down on a small chair beside the bed, took Salem's right hand in his, squeezed it. Nothing happened for thirty or forty seconds, then he opened his eyes. Thompson said, 'Salem.'

He blinked his eyes a few times. Then jerked awake, fiercely, suddenly, opened his eyes wide. Breathed hard in and out. Looked at Thompson for a full minute processing things. Thompson said, 'My name is Carter Thompson.'

Salem stared at him and eventually said, 'You saved me.'

'Not quite.'

'It's alright,' he said, 'I didn't tell her.'

'What didn't you tell her?'

'I didn't tell her where the USB was. I made up a story about where she is?'

Salem closed his eyes again. Breathed slowly in and out.

'What d'you you mean, a story?'

'I told her Rhia and Molly were going to Melbourne. I couldn't think of anything else fast enough, the pain was so bad.'

'What did you say?'

He closed his eyes again. Breathed in and out.

'I'm so tired,' he said.

'It's alright, take your time.'

'Ah,' he said, 'but I told her Rhia left a few hours after she did, maybe 11 am or noon. She would be way out in front of her. The car she's in is red, not light blue. Can you find her? Can you save her?'

'Yep, I can. You're going to have to call her, tell her she can trust me, alright?'

'Now, let's do it now.'

'You up to it, now. You sure?'

'Yeah, I can do it. I want to hear her voice.'

'Tell me the number. I'll punch it in. Leave the room. Let you take for a few minutes. But only a few minutes, we have to get to her.'

'Yes, yes.'

Thompson dialed the number, handed Salem the mobile, left the room.

He watched him from the doorway, saw tears roll down his eyes, saw him talk softly to her. He couldn't hear what he said. He was hoping like hell he wasn't telling her to run. Not now, please, Thompson hoped. The kid ended the call. Thompson walked back in.

'You can call her, it's alright. She's agreed not to run. To come into a police station. I told her what happened to me. That I couldn't stand it if anything happened to her or Molly. To do what you said. She trusts you.'

'I'm glad. I'll call her now.'

'Carter, you said your name was Carter.'

'Yeah.'

'The USB that all this shit is over. It's in the pot plant in the kitchen, pushed underneath the dirt.'

'Oh.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THOMPSON WENT TO THE APARTMENT IN DARLINGHURST. FOUND THE POT PLANT untouched. Ari's body was long gone. He put it on the small wooden table. Dug his fingers around the soil. Found the USB quickly. He'd brought his laptop in from the car. Salem had given him the password for it. That was all he needed as Salem had already broken the code. He saw the photos and videos, hundreds of them. Jamieson and Bobby Hughes: Abbotts 'A Team' for the half-senate elections were in them in various poses and also screwing these young people on video. Les Connor was on there too, also Norton but they were dead, only Norton's widow would feel the shame, or would she? She clearly knew of the existence of the photos and videos, their importance. Abbott and Bois were nowhere to be seen on the USB. He would continue on with his fucked -up Church. Sometimes the scandal cleared the way for the next generation of candidates to come through. Abbott would be appalled, shocked at the revelations.

Cunt.

He called Steele. Told him everything then sent him an email attachment which contained everything on the small light blue USB. He added a note, follow the money.

He called Tony Wu from *The Star*.

'I have your story, Wu, give me your email. You'll understand as soon as you open the attachment.'

'What exactly is on it?'

'Porn, maybe with underage, maybe not, but definitely career-ending. You might want to follow the money trail. My boss will be. I'm sure he'll work with you. I'm done with the case but...I don't know. You're the journo.'

'Thanks, Thompson, they call you Cash, don't they?'

'Yep, you can call me Carter though.'

'Dry too. I like that.'

'See you later, Wu. Do a great job.'

Thompson ended the call.

He tried calling Rhia all day but got nowhere. When Salem had called her from the hospital. He had told her to dump the car. Withdraw as much money as possible, get a train to Brisbane, where he would meet her, eventually. Rhia had done what he said but ended up on the Gold Coast. Many a person had reinvented themselves on the Gold Coast.

Thompson went the next day to St Vincent's to see Salem. He nodded at the uniform cop who greeted him with a, 'Hey, Cash.'

'Hey, Rod.'

He went to the chair on the right side of the bed. Salem woke up as he sat down. Thompson said, 'How much money did you siphon off?'

Salem rubbed his eyes his hands, and said, 'What?'

'Come on. How much?'

'Seven-fifty K.'

'How much of that did you set up in an account for Rhia.'

'Fifty K.'

'Right.'

'What now?'

'You know victims of crime usually get a payout of some kind, that would be the fifty thousand you set up for Rhia. The rest goes back otherwise it's back to jail for you and Rhia and the young kid grows up the way you and Wayne Hampton did.'

Salem coughed a few times.

'Deal.'

'I don't care about Rhia anymore. I won't be chasing her. She's not wanted by the police, but I suggest you warn her about ever coming back to Sydney. I don't think Abbott ever forgets.'

'She won't. She won't come back.'

'You need to get healthy. That cop will be outside until you're ready to go home. You've been through a lot. Most people would have given up everything before she even started. You understand that, don't you.'

'Thanks.'

'Have a good life.'

When the story broke it spread like an out-of-control bushfire. Different fronts opened up every hour. *The Star* began it all with a front-page story on Bobby Hughes and Jamieson. The headline read: **New Light Church Candidates Caught in Caligula Style Romp in Kings Cross Hotel**. The headline took up most of the front page. The real story by Wu took up the first four pages. It then went immediately viral. Hit the right-wing radio jocks who fired off salvos like it was the first world war. Abbott got plenty of attention but did no media. He had a guy for that.

The guy was Julius Heston, attorney to the wealthy and well known, the higher profile of the accused the better. He began the spin operation along the lines of evil Church members were immediately cast out. They would no longer have any connection to New Light. Mr. Abbott is appalled, shocked but will still carry on his Church duties. People were trying to destroy New Light but the faithful would be back at Bondi Junction on Sunday and watching from all over Australia.

Amen.

Another Pharisee.

Sheila Watson was by all accounts not a bad person, but the scandal spread to her like a coffee stain on a white tablecloth. She also withdrew from the Senate race.

Goodbye balance of power dreams.

Al-Abadi was released without charge. By some strange luck, he didn't appear in any videos. He didn't make any admissions and didn't report Thompson for his violence against him. He was shaken though and privately vowed never to go back to New Light Church again or ever have anything to do with again.

Billy Hassan continued doing what he did best. Thompson wondered if Steele might start looking into him at some stage. Problem was you get rid of one Billy Hassan, some other low-life criminal simply takes his place. Abbott knew it too. Didn't cut his connection to Hassan. He suggested more business would come his way. He needed the sex to control the members and others. Do what I say, or I'll reveal to the world and then you're finished, and now he could add, like Bobby Hughes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

ABOUT A WEEK LATER, BOIS CAME BACK TO MELBOURNE. REPORTED TO ABBOTT that she couldn't find Rhia anywhere. He thanked her, told her to be on her guard. The USB had been found. The police were keeping it.

'I don't need to tell you what was on there, Sally. Weak people doing weak things.'

'I know what's on there.'

'I had a call from Steele, Thompson's boss. He said copies of the USB had been made. The money would be held until the lawyers and courts decided what to do with it. Money that was taken was returned, or nearly all returned.'

'What about me?'

'You need to rest. I'll call you when we need you again.'

Rhia's abandoned car was found in a side street off Sydney Road in Coburg. It hadn't been registered to anyone. None of the papers needed had been submitted. She hadn't transferred ownership of the car.

Thompson went back to Hector's gym in Redfern, started boxing training again. Took punishment, handed it out. Pounded the heavy bag, worked on his speed and footwork with the speedball and in the ring. He kept at it for eight weeks, like the old days. He found a new love for it. Steele had given him time to recharge, to start his job all over again at the Prosecutor's Office for whatever crime was allotted to him.

Salem disappeared one day from his apartment. Only Jim Wenders knew where he was going and he wasn't telling anyone. He had recovered physically from the torture Bois had dished out but mentally he was still fragile. He hadn't told Rhia about his fingers but she would nurse him back to his old self. Both her and Molly. That's what he hoped for.

Bois pulled into the garage of her North Bondi apartment. Got out of the BMW. Slammed the door shut. Turned to enter the apartment but something caught her eye. She turned around. Carter Thompson was standing at the rear of her car.

'Miss Bois.'

'Thompson. Or Cash, isn't it? Cash, that's what they call you.'

'Yep.'

'What do you want?'

'You.'

He walked towards her and she dropped her gym bag. Took up her streetfighter stance. Thompson took up his boxing stance, stalked her as she walked back towards the wall. He was wearing black jeans, black runners, an old black T-shirt that had the word

deadly written across it in yellow. Bois was in her black Adidas tracksuit, black and white Adidas trainers.

'I've been wanting to do this since day one,' she said.

'I'm glad,' he said.

He had her with her back almost flat against the side garage wall. She tried to kick him in the stomach, he blocked it and hit her hard in the face with a straight right hand. That sweet right hand. She fell back against the wall. He didn't say anything. She pushed herself back upright. Came straight at him with kicks and a flurry of punches, he blocked the kicks. She hit him in the side of the head with her left fist, he backed away a little bit, she came hard at him, threw a right, left combination that rocked him. He bent down and she threw a kick at his head. He blocked it. She kicked out twice hard, a combination as fast as the hands of a boxer, hitting him in the side of the head again. She came in strong, with two kicks, he blocked one, then grabbed her left leg, pushed her back. She stumbled. He got up. Stalked towards her again. She resumed her stance.

He moved forward slowly, threw that sweet right hand again, hit her flush on the nose, blood oozed out, she said, 'You fucker. I'll...'

He stepped forward, hit her twice in the forehead, hard as fuck. She staggered back, he followed her, spoke for the first time in the fight,

'What's the matter, Miss Bois?'

She stood up straight, adopted her stance again. She had been trained to accept punishment for long periods. She came back at him, threw out a kick to his midriff, he grabbed her leg, dragged her towards him. Put his other hand in his back pocket. Pulled out a small, super sharp boning knife, dug it hard into the fleshy area below her ribs, tore at her flesh, wrenched it out. Her mouth

opened wide, but she didn't scream. The pain. He stuck it into her side again, tore at her again, and said, 'That's how you fight, isn't it? With a knife, with a weapon.'

He stabbed her again in the chest, twice, she reeled back onto the ground. He plunged the knife into her heart. Stood up. Watched her bleed out.

He stabbed himself firmly on both arms with the knife. Scratched the knife across his stomach. A surface wound. He would have small scars to remind him of this. Remind him of Ari. Put the knife in her right hand, then kicked it out a few feet away.

He did not spare her.

He called Steele and said, 'I'm at the home of Miss Bois in North Bondi, in the garage. She called me here on the pretext that someone had tried to break into her home. I knew her from working on the case of Mr. Norton.'

'Go on.'

'She attacked me with a knife. I defended myself. She's dead, unfortunately. I need a clean-up team here fast and Steele?'

'Yes.'

'Not Kholi. I'm too close to him. You understand?'

'Of course.'

'Also, I think I've had enough of this job.'

'What will you do?'

'I'll get a PEA license.'

'Take some time to think it through. Do that for me, Carter.'

'I will.'

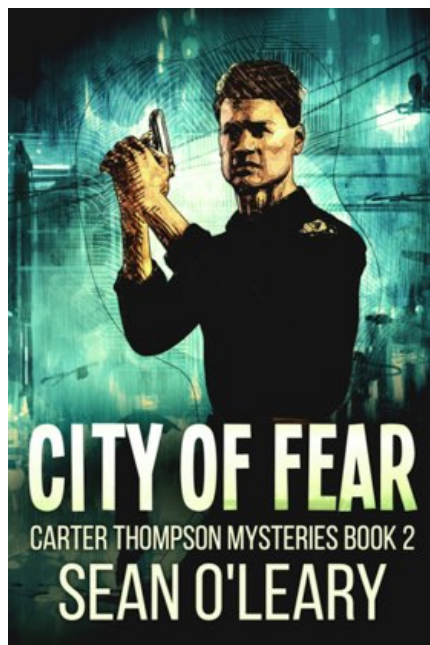
No one would miss her.

Good riddance.

Next in the Series:

City Of Fear

(Carter Thompson Mysteries Book 2)



Carter Thompson has left the Prosecutors Office, and has been working as a private investigator ever since. After receiving a call from a distraught father to find his missing daughter, Thompson takes the case.

His search for the girl takes him into the world of model agencies, nightclub owners and drug-dealing gangsters, many of whom he has a past with. And if that's not enough, Carter's old boss from the Prosecutors Office also needs him to help out with his son, who's started to mingle with the wrong crowd and dabble in hard drugs.

To solve the case, Cater will need to trust his instincts... and defeat some old enemies along the way. But can he find the girl before it's too late?

City Of Fear

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sean O'Leary is a writer from Melbourne, Australia. He has published two literary short story collections, 'My Town' and 'Walking'. His literary novella 'Drifting' was the winner of the 'The Great Novella Search 2016' and published in 2017. He self-published 'The Heat' his crime novella set in Darwin and Bangkok in 2019. 'Drifting' and 'The Heat' will be re-published by Next Chapter. His second crime novella 'Preston Noir' was published in 2020 in **Crime Double Feature...Neo Noir** from the indie press 'Zombie Pirate Publishing'. His crime fiction collection **Wonderland** was recently published by the down and dirty folk at Close to the Bone Publishing in the UK. His new crime novel 'Going All the Way' is available now through Next Chapter. His collection 'Tokyo Jazz & Other Stories' is also available through Next Chapter now. He is currently working on a new crime series and short stories ongoing all the time.

He likes to walk all over the face of the earth, travel as often as he can, supports Melbourne Football Club (a life sentence), enjoys art but knows nothing about it, is a film fanatic and writes like a demon.

To learn more about Sean O'Leary, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).