‘Evermore’: a novel and accompanying exegesis

Joanne Taylor

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The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

................................................................. (Signature)
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Abstract

And then? —Reading For The End

Novels generally rely on suspension of disbelief and on techniques of suspense to involve the reader in the story. The exegesis of this thesis will explore these issues and related questions in relation to crime fiction, while the creative work explores these issues and questions in the context of a crime novel. The thesis poses the questions, how is suspense created and sustained for the length of a crime novel? Technically, how are crime fiction narratives shifted and shaped so that their trajectory encompasses successful resolution of the story and the discourse? What makes an ending work? What is the relationship between loss and sense-making in the narrative and the place of stories in relation to this? The exegetical work examines three very different crime novels that create and sustain suspense and the ways in which they do so: Agatha Christie’s *A Murder Is Announced*, Neil Cross’ *Burial* and Garry Disher’s *Chain of Evidence*. Detailed reference will be made to these works, with others referenced as appropriate. The thesis contrives to reveal how craft is consciously deployed to bring together elements in the text in such a way that they combine to form a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. The creative response to these questions aims to show a crafted whole, encapsulated in the crime novel which forms the greater part of this thesis. A synopsis for the novel is as follows: It is nearly ten years since Ella Ravell disappeared from a Sydney bushland suburb. It is also ten years since a baby died in its cradle. But at least with that death there was a body. In this novel, the shadowy underside of the cosy world of Sydney suburbia is shown through ordinary interactions between friends, neighbours and strangers. The novel follows the lives of Ella Ravell’s family and neighbours ten years on from her disappearance, and the developing action highlights the fracture lines already running through people’s lives; lines that it takes little further stress to break. As the cracks appear, the ways in which we invent and construct stories of our lives and give them meaning to resolve our disconnection are laid bare. By the close of the story, the characters must face the randomness that is part of nature and that happy endings are unlikely. The use of animal motifs—dead,
dangerous, domestic and fantastic—acts in tandem with the Sydney settings to emphasise gothic elements in the story. These elements connect to overall themes of lost loves, of lost illusions, of extinction of hope and of species and the danger of nature. The Australian Museum and its specimens naturally belong in the realm of the fantastic, and this story places them at centre stage, along with showcasing parts of the city of Sydney that add to this fantastic element. The contrast between the darkness of the themes and the lightness of tone effected by the narrative techniques used to unfold the story of Ella Ravell’s disappearance contrives to mirror the ways in which narratives impose an illusion of the orderliness of events. The choice of a multi-narrator structure is intended to activate and emphasise psychological and symbolic nuances in the text, adding to the creation of a suburban gothic atmosphere. Under the surface of a Sydney and people that we think we know lies something darker and more complex, a space where loss and vanishing and dark, sometimes long-held, secrets and sorrows dominate people’s lives.
A note on citations
This thesis follows the Chicago Manual of Style (15th edition) by implementing shortened citations in footnotes. Please refer to the bibliography for full bibliographic details.
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Chapter 1
Reading for the End

Novels generally rely on suspension of disbelief and on techniques of suspense to involve the reader in the story. How is suspense created and sustained for the length of a crime novel? Technically, how are crime fiction narratives shifted and shaped so that their trajectory encompasses successful resolution of the story and the discourse? What makes an ending work? What is the relationship between loss and sense-making in the narrative and the place of stories in relation to this? This exegetical work examines three very different crime novels that create and sustain suspense and the ways in which they do so: Agatha Christie’s *A Murder Is Announced*, Neil Cross’ *Burial* and Garry Disher’s *Chain of Evidence*. Detailed reference will be made to these works, with others referenced as appropriate.

In each case, a close textual analysis will incorporate discussions of structure, dialogue, place, character, the diegetical uses to which the body or the corpse(s) are put and the shaping power of point-of-view. These are the techniques by which a crime story is shaped and the tools that must be used to craft endings which manifest an illusion of inevitability about outcomes. The way in which techniques such as foreshadowing, clues and red herrings are used to create and sustain suspense will be explored. The question, “what makes an ending work?” is the one against which all questions of suspense will ultimately most likely be judged. If the ending does not “work” in the sense of satisfying the reader, then any amount of technical prowess demonstrated on the way may be irrelevant.¹ So what does make an ending work? At the most basic level, resolution of both story and discourse² must be felt by the reader to be

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¹ There will conceivably be those, who having enjoyed the process of reading and appreciating the dexterity of the author along the way will not find their pleasure diminished by discovering an unsatisfying ending. These are likely to be in a minority.

² 'Discourse' is a term that, like 'paradigm', has moved from a specialist lexicon into the public sphere. In this paper, the meaning of the word 'discourse' is equivalent to the structuralist narrative theory descriptor, where 'story' is the basic chronological events of a narrative and 'discourse' refers to the way in which the story is told. It will be noticed that this term, discourse, is equivalent to the Russian formalist term 'szujet', discussed on page six of this exegesis.
satisfactory. In this sense of satisfaction, any reading of the types of crime fiction explored here must also include the re-reading. Explorations of the centrality of this process to reading crime fiction may be found in any contemporary critical text on the subject; two of the most instructive of these, encompassing an impressive breadth of theorists and constructs, are Lee Horsley’s *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* and John Scaggs’ *Crime Fiction*. It is this circular re-reading made after the end of the linear story is reached—a reading which re-presents clues, red herrings, foreshadowing—which determines the ultimate enjoyment of the reading overall. This is the paradox of reading well-executed crime novels. They are read not simply to the end, but for the end, and what makes an ending work are the ways in which the preceding story has unfurled.

The very word, resolution—*re-solution*—is suggestive of the re-solving that accompanies all end readings of a crime fiction text. The process of reading for the end is precisely this process of watching and/or participating in (depending on your critical point of view) the unpacking of secrets, laying them out as clues or red herrings, and then piecing them together, jigsaw like, to see the picture at the end. Of investigating the investigation; of seeing the truths expand and contract to fit, or not, inside a set piece. Of making sense of how characters construct stories around the losses in their own lives;³ of following the stories that are subsumed and often left irresolute within the discourse, stories that are unearthed as the main story moves inevitably forward (or backward or back and forth, as the case may be) toward a resolution.

The texts chosen provide contrasting examples of ways in which dialogue, place and character act as shifty signifiers. In different ways Christie, Cross and Disher’s crime novels show how the intentional work of dialogue is often to conceal as much as to reveal, with linguistic exchanges always positioned, moderated, and appropriated by social and psychological contexts and by other speakers. These stories are all in some way about loss and making sense of loss, whether the loss grieved is within the story or outside it. Additionally, the texts chosen provide examples of consistently strong ways

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³ The loss referred to here is not simply the body in the text, the loss of the person who dies in the story, but the significant losses and traumas of individuals in the narratives, whether these events happen within the story-time or are reported historical traumas, ones that have taken place outside the immediacy of the story framework.
in which the crime novel has evolved in the sixty odd years since *A Murder Is Announced* was published in 1950. All three of the texts are by practitioners who are established writers of crime fiction, as well as being established writers in other areas. All have received international recognition, whether in the form of listing for or winning prestigious awards or translation. One of the chosen novels is a whodunnit, one concentrates on the effects of the crime and one is a police procedural.

Agatha Christie has been chosen as representative of the puzzle plotters due to her status as the most successful and widely known of the ‘Golden Age’ puzzle-plotters. *A Murder is Announced* is a classic puzzle plot, published a decade after the generally agreed upon years of the ‘Golden Age’, but still a recognizable example of that renowned style. Along with writers Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, Christie wrote with full knowledge and awareness of the conventions published as S.S Van Dine’s ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’, and broke most of these rules during her fifty-plus years of writing fiction. Everyone has an idea of something called an Agatha Christie: a mystery revolving around a narrative with a lightness of tone, a murder which triggers the action of the story, an investigation which casts suspicion over all the individuals in a small community (each of whom always have some possible motive for murder) and a resolution which will not be effected by representatives of law and order, the police, but by a private individual playing detective. Most likely this will be the dapper ex-Belgian policeman Hercule Poirot or the well-connected Miss Marple (not only is her nephew a writer of unpleasant books, providing her with access to understanding various cultural milieus otherwise outside her ken, she has numerous friends whose lives are surprised by murder when she visits, and some friends in high places such as Sir Henry Clithering of Scotland Yard). This particular Agatha Christie is quite likely the epitome or prototype of the Agatha Christie that exists nebulously in the mind of a reader: not only are the characters English villagers, the murders all happen in the English village where they live. There is no

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4 The term ‘Golden Age’ is used here for convenience, it being a generally recognised term. It is not part of the work of this thesis to enter into controversies surrounding the correctness of categorisations such as ‘Golden Age’.

5 Although *A Murder Is Announced* is technically outside the ‘Golden Age’, the style, subject and author make it appropriate for it to be referred to as such for the purposes of this thesis.
exotic location, just a semi-rural setting, a close community of suspects, and Miss Marple as detective to aid the misguided efforts of the police. Additionally, this text exemplifies what Horsley identifies as traits distinctive to the detective novel: a ‘linear, end-oriented nature; … characteristic proliferation of detail and the prioritising of hermeneutic code over character’ (Horsley, 2005: 23). The way in which the story is told ensures the involvement of the implied reader in the investigative process. The structure of the sjuzet evolves through the eyes of Miss Marple, whose analytical position the reader assumes. She reorders the narrative so that we see and understand the primacy of the investigative order of events rather than simply the linear time in which things happen. This is a narrative with which the reader is extremely familiar, in terms of both structure and outcome.

Neil Cross’ *Burial*, published in 2009, is located firmly in the tradition of noir thriller, in a lineage that includes the novels of Patricia Highsmith, James M. Cain, Patricia Carlon and Gillian Flynn and is possibly as far removed from ‘the idea of an Agatha Christie’ as a generic crime novel can be. The tone of the story has a distinctively dark feel, with the subject matter and the discourse pulling the narrative toward horror. A contemporary writer, Cross’s novels show the classic noir traits of doubling and plots turning and twisting about and around issues of identity. The issues he explores, in *Burial* and in other novels, are moral and ethical issues about good and evil, guilt and accountability and fear. Cross has written a number of stand alone novels, including the Booker long-listed *Always the Sun*, all of which could can be classified in the same noir category as *Burial*, but is perhaps best known as a screenwriter, having written a couple of seasons of ‘Spooks’ and the recent ‘Luther’ for the BBC.

*Chain of Evidence* is a series novel from Garry Disher’s Australian police

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7 Patricia Highsmith and James M Cain are perhaps better known to the general public these days for adaptations of their best-known books into movies (Highsmith’s *Strangers On a Train* was adapted by Hitchcock, and more recently there have been critically acclaimed productions of *The Talented Mr Ripley* and *Ripley’s Game*; similarly, Cain’s best-known works were adapted for film). Patricia Carlon is an Australian author of psychologically terrifying suspense novels whose work, although published in her lifetime, went largely unrecognised until after her death in 2005. Some of her chilling works (including a novel which recalls Poe’s ‘The Cask Of Amontillado’, where a living person is walled in), and *Hush, It’s a Game!*, a story where a child witnesses the murder of her babysitter, unbeknownst to the murderer, were recently republished; Gillian Flynn is a contemporary American author. Amongst her works are *Sharp Objects*, a tale of a self-cutter and a sociopathic narcissistic Munchausen-by-proxy mother and *Dark Places*, an equally horrifying story revolving around a serial killer.
procedural series set on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. The police procedural is the novel of choice for many of those writing crime fiction today. In explaining the popularity of this generic form, Priestman has this to say:

In the more-than-half century since the Second World War, a growing demand for a semblance of realism has been met by giving the main detective roles to the only people actually empowered to investigate serious crime: the police. . . The attempt to apply rigid single-hero whodunnit rules to this genre is becoming increasingly futile. (Priestman, 2003: 5)

Disher’s series commenced in 1999, with The Dragon Man introducing the series policeman hero Hal Challis. There are six books in the series to date, of which Chain of Evidence is the fourth. The style of these procedurals is the realist mode of such internationally known crime novelists as Ruth Rendell, Ian Rankin, Stephen Booth, John Harvey, Peter Robinson and resembles the British rather than the American style of such procedurals, and is arguably closer in sensibility to that of Scandanavian writers than either British or Americans.8 Graeme Blundell recently had this to say of the Hal Challis series:

. . . Disher’s brilliant regional procedural series featuring Detective Inspector Challis and set on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula. Like the best of the Swedes, his writing is compelling and atmospheric, the relentless social realism disturbing. . . Disher . . . cares about their [his characters] interlinked worlds as much as he does about labyrinthine plots . . . and the showy brainwork of his coppers. (Blundell, 2012: theaustralian.com.au.review July-14-12)

Garry Disher has published over forty books, including two crime fiction series, literary fiction, children’s and young adults fiction and books on the craft of writing.

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His experimental literary novel *The Sunken Road* was nominated for the Booker Prize.  

Fiction focusing on mystery and criminal activity has expanded since the first writings of and about detective and horror fiction from Wilkie Collins, Edgar Allan Poe and Conan Doyle to include postmodern, often metafictional, texts like Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, Borges’ *Labyrinths* and Auster’s *City of Glass* alongside realist ‘literary’ novels such as those of Donna Tartt (*The Secret History*, *The Little Friend*) and Sebastian Faulks (*Engleby*). However, crossover novels that use the generic conventions of crime stories are not necessarily read by those who consider themselves readers of crime fiction; and readers of such crossover novels are not necessarily readers of generic crime fiction. The plays on conventions, characterisations, language and novel length practised by ‘literary’ novelist are not necessarily the types of play that those primarily captivated by puzzle plots, private eye stories, police procedurals or the whys of noir will seek out. Even within categories, further delineation of types of, for instance, police procedural appeal to different readers. The crime novels of Elizabeth George, realist novels of Victorian length and characterization, set in contemporary Britain with the unlikely person of the Earl of Asherton heading up a team at the Met, are not the same type of police procedurals as those of Mark Billingham or Ian Rankin. Nor do these novels fit into a category that includes Patricia Cornwell’s closer-to-horror-stories. Kate Atkinson, too, is a writer whose series novels with detective Jackson Brodie span different bookstore categories. Stories of Ian Rankin’s Rebus novels being shelved with “Scottish” fiction also indicate that even novels declaring their colours with seemingly no ambivalence may be read in other ways by those unfamiliar with the genre. Possibly the ever-expanding elastic boundaries of the generic category

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9 Disher has won or been nominated for numerous prizes, nationally and internationally. He has twice won the prestigious German Crime Fiction award the Deutsche Krimi Preis, once for the Wyatt series and once for the Hal Challis series. Other past winners in the international category of the Deutsche Krimi Preis include Ian Rankin, James Lee Burke, Elmore Leonard, John le Carre and Carl Hiaasen.

10 Literary fiction is, of course, in itself a category, and while there is much debate about what exactly constitutes this category, there is general agreement that some of the most important differences between literary and genre fiction such as crime fiction relate to depth of characterization and primacy of plot and story. Fiction categorized as crime fiction is likely to have a more visible plot and a stronger focus on story.

11 Kate Atkinson is also a writer of literary fiction, having published *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* before the Jackson Brodie series, which includes *When Will There Be Good News*, *One Good Turn* and *Started Early, Took My Dog*.
of crime fiction may need revision and further clarification. However, one thing that is certain of all the novelists mentioned here is their reliance on techniques of suspense to create narrative tensions that make readers want to read to the end, and to enhance the numerous re-readings which will inevitably occur.

In talking about what makes an ending work, the beginning of each text analysed will be examined to see if the implicit promise made to the reader in the set up of the story is delivered in the end. Will we find out whodunnit, why they dunnit, will they get away with it? Whatever question, explicit or implicit, is posed in the beginning must be answered in some fashion for the ending to begin to work. As E.M Forster explains in Aspects of the Novel, the difference between story and plot is simple. While both are constructs of narratives of events, the story is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence, while the plot focuses on the causality that links the events. Forster emphasises that when a reader is interested in the story, they ask “and then?” while those interested in the plot will focus on the “why?” (Forster, 2005: 87). In crime fiction, story and plot must work together with other elements of suspense to create a discourse that destabilises and confounds reader expectations while simultaneously providing the reader with an inevitable sense of an ending.

Much has been written about the underlying structure of stories in general and of the underlying structure of crime fiction, especially that fiction categorised as detective fiction. Although this thesis concentrates on close textual analysis rather than application of particular critical theory, a brief discussion of some crucial theoretical contributions to the field of crime fiction and related areas of analysis is appropriate here, all the more so as some of the terms, language and ideas employed have slipped from the discourse of critical theory into the everyday lexicon. Additionally, some of the commonly held beliefs about the reasons for reading crime fiction will be acknowledged.

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12 E.M. Forster popularized these terms in discussions of novelistic craft. It should be noted that the term ‘plot’ is not interchangeable or synonymous with the term ‘discourse’, although the plot of a novel can be considered a part of the novel’s discourse. Forster’s series of lectures explaining the novelist’s craft, given at Cambridge in 1927, was published as a collection in that same year in Aspects of the Novel.

13 It is not necessary here to reformulate the debate between Propp’s investigation of the structure of fairytales and Levi-Strauss’ contention that Propp’s schema was lacking as it did not address the psychological meaning of such tales.
Horsley succinctly explains the production of the ‘double logic’ privileged by structuralist critics: ‘The centrality of the investigator’s role creates the characteristic ‘backward ‘ construction of analytic detective fiction, which throws emphasis on the task of explaining what has happened as some earlier point in time.’ (Horsley, 2005:23).

Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky deployed the terms the fabula and the szujet to distinguish between the expression of the story as it unfolded (the fabula) and the way in which the unfolding of the story was expressed (the szujet). This framework of two simultaneous stories operating at different overlapping levels can be profitably utilised to explore detective story narratives. The idea of the two stories is famously further explicated by Tzvetan Todorov, who used the model to argue for categoric distinctions between detective fiction and the thriller and suspense novel. Todorov contends that detective fiction sees the fabula and szujet as setting in opposition the story of the crime to the story of the investigation.

Gregoriou’s discussion of the ‘formulaic regularities’ (Gregoriou, 2007: 44) of underlying patterns of crime fiction in general is intriguing in this context. She prefaces her discussion by quoting J.Ball, from his 1976 book The Mystery Story:

A good mystery writer can write a better novel than a good novelist can write a mystery. This is because the mystery writer has had to develop the disciplines of the novel form to a far higher degree than is required of the straight novelist. The mystery is a craft within a craft and all that pertains to the art of the mystery pertains to the art of the novel. (Gregoriou, 2007: 44)

Pulitzer prize-winning novelist Jane Smiley’s account of the contribution to her understanding of craft that many re-readings of The Hound of the Baskervilles gave her is significant in this context:

. . . I learned how the tricks and the deceptions worked together logically. The novel had two stories—the story as it unfolded on the surface, and the story of what had happened. …The veil that suspense and style throw over construction on the first reading or two lifts, and the author’s plotting becomes more and more clear. I
learned about the logical construction of plot and the clear construction of character. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was not the best novel I read at that time in my life, but it was the most clearly constructed. (Smiley, 2005: 32)

While acknowledging that Ball does not specify his terms regarding the ‘disciplines of the novel’, Gregoriou refers to Dennis Porter’s oft-quoted 1981 text *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, linking Porter’s argument that most novels require ‘retrospective repatterning’ as a reader proceeds through the story sifting through hypotheses to arrive at the meaning of a work to Porter’s statement that ‘nowhere does it [retrospective repatterning] occur with such formulaic regularity as in a detective story’ (Gregoriou, 2007:45).

As Gregoriou points out, Porter (1981), Mandel (1984) and Ball (1976) amongst others, contend that detective fiction is a fiction of ‘escape and relaxation’ (Gregoriou, 2007: 49). This is certainly a view with which Auden would have concurred, with his well-known comparison of the ‘detective story’ to an addictive pleasure in his lauded essay, ‘The Guilty Vicarage’. Ian Rankin (in Gregoriou, 2007: 52) suggests the seductive quality of crime fiction, the vicarious thrill, is a primary motive for reading. Gregoriou connects this idea with Bakhtin’s ideas of ‘carnival’, a dark transformative energy disrupting social relations and an inversion of the hierarchies of official worlds (Gregoriou, 2007:96). She specifically states that ‘the fascination with violence and crime experienced in contemporary popular culture reveals the potential entertainment value to be realized from such acts’ (Gregoriou, 2007: 100) and goes on to argue ‘that the reading of a crime novel, that engages with the irrational and incomprehensible . . . can be argued to be a manifestation of the notion of carnival in itself’ clarifying how readers of crime fiction are both spectators and participants in the carnival of crime. (Gregoriou, 2007: 101-102). After drawing a parallel between Jungian archetypes and schema theory, she discusses the significance of Jungian archetypes in crime fiction, defined by Jung as ‘complexes of experience that come upon us like fate’ (Jung 1968: 30, cited in Gregoriou, 2007: 108).  

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14 ‘[e]ssentially, the context that someone needs to make sense of individual experiences, events parts of situations or elements of language is stored in background memory as an associative
the shadow and links it to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque in her discussion of social deviance in contemporary crime fiction. (Gregoriou, 2007: 108-111). She uses quotes from contemporary crime writers Michael Connolly and Kathy Reichs to illustrate her argument that crime fiction is carnival, with readers being involved in reading as an act of transgression, voyeurism and vicarious living, and in the implicit reassurance inherent in the carnivalesque form, that order will be restored in the end. John Docker, in his critical analysis of popular culture, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* speaks of how claims to truth and certainty are contested by carnivalesque figures and masking, with figures such as clowns and fools parodying both conventionality and their own claims to truth (Docker, 1995: 143). Docker later places the ‘liminal figure’ of the fictional modern detective as occupying a position poised ‘between explorer and voyeur’, where the detective can be a hero but also a ‘fool, trickster, rogue’ (Docker, 1995: 228-230). Novelist and academic David Lodge, discussing consciousness in *Consciousness and the Novel*, affirms the dialogic ideas of Bakhtin, at one stage linking Bakhtinian dialogism with the thinking of neurobiologist Gerald Edelman. Lodge quotes Edelman as stating: ‘phenomenal psychology . . . cannot be shared in the same way physics is shared’ because ‘consciousness . . .exists in and is conditioned by history and therefore every individual’s consciousness is unique, because linguistically based consciousness is “never self-sufficient, it is always in dialogue with some other, even if that interlocutor is not present”’ (Lodge, 2003: 113).

Peter Brooks, in his engaging discussion of modern literature and art in *Realist Vision*, raises the following issue:

How to explain the real if limited fascination of representations that do come close to keeping a record of the everyday, that claim a largely unedited version of experience? We have a thirst for reality even as we suffer a surfeit of reality.

network of knowledge. In the course of experiencing an event or making sense of a situation a schema is dynamically produced which can be modelled as a sort of script based on similar situations encountered previously. New experiences and new incoming information are understood by matching them to existing schematic knowledge. (Stockwell (2003:255), quoted in Gregoriou, 2007: 30)
Perhaps more accurately, we have a thirst for the reality of others, which may be paired with boredom or pain in our own. Literature as a whole, and the novel certainly, responds to this thirst, offering what we sometimes call ‘vicarious experience’. . . where realist fictions are concerned, vicarious experience often comes by way of voyeurism, looking at the normally hidden lives of others (Brooks, 2005: 216-217).

Brooks goes on to observe that ‘postmodern culture tends to be predominantly visible, indeed wedded to that ‘frenzy of the visible’ identified by Comolli. Certainly the most influential medium of our time is television . . .’ (Brooks, 2005: 227)

There is also a widely held belief that crime fiction provides a reader with a manageable world, in contrast to the chaos and complexity of the actual world. Jane Smiley surmises that part of the popularity of Sherlock Holmes may be his pre-WW1 Status, a time when the recently industrialised world was perhaps a world which defined itself less by its suffering. Significantly, this world was also a world less defined by mass media and the primacy of a self-reflexive televisual society was still some decades in the future. If the idea of Conan Doyle’s fiction as ‘endlessly reassuring’ (Smiley, 2006: 421) due to its displacement of suffering is considered to have any validity, then the same consideration must automatically be given to Mark Seltzer’s ideas of the contemporary wound culture, and the public pathological sphere, as expressed in the Spring 1997 issue of ‘October Magazine’:

The contemporary public sphere represents itself to itself, from the art and culture scenes to tabloid and talk TB, as a culture of suffering, states of injury, and wounded attachments. The resurgence of trauma as a flash point of psychological and social ways of locating the subject and its vicissitudes is thus perhaps by now self-evident.

But the category itself, and what exactly it provides evidence of, have in fact remained something of a black box. (Seltzer, 1997: 4)

Both Peter Brooks and Mark Seltzer’s ‘modelling’ theories propose the world as a toy system. Compare Peter Brooks, speaking of the ‘the scale model’ to Mark Seltzer’s
abstract entitled ‘The Official World’. Brooks states that:

the pleasure humans take in the scale model has something to do with the sense they [the models] provide of being able to play with and therefore to master the real world, a way to bind and organise its energies. The scale model . . . allows us to get both our fingers and our minds around objects otherwise alien and imposing. The realist novel similarly offers us a reduction of the world, compacted into a volume that we know (Brooks, 2005: 228)

while Seltzer asserts that:

The official world is a self-making, self-administering, and self-evaluating world. It everywhere generates little working models of itself — small worlds, little systems, sealed crime scenes, quarantine zones, game spaces. . . . The modern world comes to itself via these scale models of a unified and autistic world . . . The social science fictions of this world are then nowhere clearer than in modern crime fiction . . . (Seltzer, 2011)

(Seltzer, 2011: Abstract, The Official World)

Close textual analysis of the crime fiction texts specified earlier provides a glimpse into ways in which the world is perceived and managed by characters whose world is dominated by traumatic narratives of explanation. (It will be seen that all the significant characters in these novels carry within them recollections of traumatic moments or events, moments that have defined them, moments to which they may or may not be reconciled. These moments of loss and the ways in which they make sense of their losses constitute their individual stories). As Jane Smiley writes in her discussion of the novelist’s craft, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel:*

Novelists have protagonists; protagonists, like narrators, have points of view. Point of view is like perspective in a realistic painting—it changes the size and shape, the nature and identity, of characters, objects and events in accordance with their proximity to the viewer…
The novel is the only imaginative form that must have both action and point of view, suspense and reflection. In this, it seems to mimic the way life feels. (Smiley, 2006:90-91).

Smiley appears to be referring to realist novels (the dominant form of the novel for so long) in this final sentence. Only one of the three novels discussed here falls into this category. But her observations about point of view are applicable to all novels and the alteration of perspective in relation to the reader, the point(s) of view available, is a major way in which the tension of a story is maintained. There is also a (relatively recent) move to ‘series’ crime fiction where a central group of characters appear in more than one novel but each novel is told from the point of view of a different character. Crime fiction by Irish writer Tana French and Australian writer Peter Temple provides examples of these, while Kate Atkinson’s novels featuring Jackson Brodie are examples of multi-narrator stories, popular in early crime and horror novels such as The Moonstone, The Woman in White and Dracula. The device is also recently utilized by Orhan Pamuk in his literary murder mystery ‘My Name Is Red’.

In the forward to the 1994 edition of a seminal text of spatial theory, A Poetics of Space, John R. Stilgoe writes that ‘Bachelard reveals time after time that setting is more than scene in works of art, that it is often the armature around which works revolve’ (Bachelard, 1994: x). Philip Howell, in ‘Crime and the City Solution: Crime Fiction, Urban Knowledge, and Radical Geography’ clarifies the similarity of challenges facing urban planners and detectives. Beginning with Schimd’s contention that ‘the city is a problem that needs to be solved’ for both radical geographers and fictional detectives, Howell contends that crime fictions, rather than being read as ‘salutary misrepresentations’ are better read as ‘alternative epistemologies of the city’ (Howell, 1998: 362). Although his argument contentiously assumes ‘the common ideology of the detective story’ his assertion that ‘geographical description plays a central role in the

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15 However, the free indirect speech which dominates the narrative of Burial is a realist convention, and A Murder Is Announced may also be said to use conventions of realism without being a realist novel.

16 Howell uses the term ‘geographers’, which in the context of the paper would seem to be equivalent to ‘urban planners’
epistemological claims of most detective novels,’ is essentially correct and more important for his central argument for a reading of crime fictions as a legitimate hermenutics for knowing and understanding place. His focus is on the police procedurals of John Harvey, but a reader of crime fiction is conversant with innumerable examples, amongst them Brunetti’s Venice, Rebus’s Edinburgh, Cliff Hardy’s Sydney, the Iceland of Arnaldur Indridason’s Detectives Erlendur and Elinborg.

The solving of a mystery will often necessitate the recreation of past spatial and temporal movements of individuals and Lisa Kadonga suggests in ‘Strange Countries and Secret Worlds in Ruth Rendell’s Crime Novels’ that ‘For this reason, geography is often a central element in mysteries, even if the author did not intend it to be’ (Kadonga,1998: 423-428). In discussing internal geography, Bachelard speaks of how Jung uses the images of cellar and attic ‘In the attic, the day’s experiences can always efface the fears of night. In the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls’ in arguing for a phenomenological understanding of Jung’s psychoanalysis, and speaks of Poe’s tales as exploiting ‘natural fears’ ‘inherent in the dual nature of both man and house’ (Bachelard, 1994: 19-20).

The following pages will utilise many of the ideas discussed here in close textual analysis of the chosen texts.
Chapter 2
Agatha Christie — *A Murder Is Announced*

It’s all about the plot. For many readers, that’s the enjoyment of a Christie, the pure pleasure of the text that Roland Barthes refers to. Her convoluted plots, broadbrush characterisations, English pleasantries and countrysides are like cryptic story crosswords successfully designed to tease and satisfy. However, this popular, conservative and ultimately reductive way of reading Christie has been critically destabilised in recent times by fresh attention being paid to the social context of the times in which she wrote and to radical deconstruction of her texts by, amongst others, Alison Light and Pierre Bayard. As Horsley notes in discussing Alison Light’s *Forever England*: ‘these [works of the Golden Age] are novels that can be seen as encoding disturbing issues, that, although not directly articulated, are inescapably present. Thus, Light argues, if we look more closely at the anxieties expressed by texts themselves we might find them to be less unproblematically conservative than we first imagined’. (Horsley, 2005: 39-40). Horsley’s discussion of Bayard’s conception of Christie’s novels as ‘writerly’ texts, in the sense of texts whose fluctuating meaning(s) are produced by a reader as opposed to ‘readerly’ texts where meanings are stable and incapable of pluralities, is especially pertinent here:

Analogous to the detective rather than in thrall to him, the reader is invited to interpret, to exercise intellectual acuity rather than just passively submitting to a conventional and endlessly repeated, always predictable ritual. Whereas critics stressing the inflexibility of the formula tend to regard such fiction as unaware of ‘its own silences or of its continual repetition’ (Porter, 1981: 189-90), Bayard’s analysis suggests that it is precisely an acute awareness of all the various forms of repetition and silence that characterizes the good detective writer, contributing to a heightened sense of how readers actually play the game—of the expectations they bring to any text on the basis of their encounter with repeated examples of the same form, and of the way in which an astute reader will fill in the silences, the ellipses. (Horsley, 2005: 44)
But how do narratives so clue-heavy move forward without metaphorically tripping over themselves in their haste to conceal or uncover? The following textual analysis of *A Murder Is Announced* will show how Christie uses techniques of suspense and tension to make the ending of the story work. Light’s ideas will be utilised to illuminate the relationship between loss and sense-making in the narrative and the place of stories in relation to this. Bayard’s conception of Christie’s novels as writerly texts (Horsley 2005:44) where readers are positioned as active participants in the creation of meaning will be explored in relation to the ways in which Christie creates and sustains tension in *A Murder is Announced*. Additionally, this close textual analysis will uncover how Christie has ‘perfected’ two of S.S Van Dine’s rules of the ‘disguise principle’, these rules, being 1) ‘The truth must be hidden throughout the book’, and rule 15) ‘while being hidden, this truth must be accessible to the reader, even in plain view’.

Informal deconstruction of a Christie text after the event—after the solution to the crime is revealed—is a pleasure looked forward to by readers. A backwards reading of *A Murder is Announced* reveals clues that would have provided the answer, shows skilled placement of red herrings, and creates awareness of how ellipses in the narrative make the story work.

In this parlour-game Christie, the story is simple. A forthcoming murder is formally announced in the morning paper. The invitation invites those who read it to a party at which said murder will take place. At the appointed hour the lights go out, a man opens a door, shines a torch, says, ‘Stick ‘em up!’ and shots are fired. (Christie: 1980: 30). When the lights are turned back on, the man is found dead—shot.

Whodunnit and why? Enter Miss Marple, to assist the police in finding the solution. Two bodies later, the alleged intended victim is found to be the actual murderer of all three people.

This destabilisation of the conventional triangle of detective, victim and murderer is just one example of the way in which conventions are played with in this narrative. The death of Rudi Scherz, with his last moments and movements reminiscent of the best
 traditions of slapstick comedy, is the ‘body scene’ the audience has been waiting for.\(^{17}\) Pleasurable anticipation of a ‘murder game’ has been a reasonable expectation of both characters and the implied reader. Although an experienced reader of Christie is likely to have been prepared for a murder ‘game’ which results in a ‘real’ victim, it is unlikely that this particular scenario would be envisaged by any reader, whatever their familiarity with the marvels of Christie intrigue and invention.\(^{18}\) This effective twisting of convention to create surprise, thus adding to the maintenance of tension in the narrative, is discoverable in this story time after time. From this showy start, the narrative evolves into a story played out in what could be said to be three acts. The first act encompasses the murder of Rudi Schertz; the second act ends when Dora Bunner dies; and the third act (which includes the third murder, that of Amy Murgatroyd) contains the denouement.

Thinking of this novel as having a three-part structure is useful for analysis.\(^{19}\) As Bunch points out (Christie, 1980: 162) when discussing the murders with Inspector Craddock and Miss Marple: ‘It’s like one of those pointer things at fairs . . . go round and round and stop at something different every time’. Bunch is referring to the way in which, three quarters of the way through this narrative, confusion and disorder are still ascendant, with signs pointing in a multitude of directions toward possible murderers. The plethora of possibilities have not yet been narrowed by the long arm of logic or the clear gaze of an elderly lady as neither the fact-collecting representatives of the law nor the intuitive understanding of Miss Marple have yet gathered or analysed sufficient facts

\(^{17}\) It is easy for a contemporary reader to see a parodic echo of ‘when in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand’. Raymond Chandler’s ‘The Simple Art of Murder’ and A Murder is Announced were both published in 1950, although a different version of ‘The Simple Art of Murder’ was published in 1946. Christie was clearly aware of the work of American crime writers (note Miss Marple’s reference to Dashiell Hammett’s ‘the fall guy’, in A Murder is Announced [Christie, 1980:79]) and it is quite possible that she was aware of this sentiment. However, regardless of Chandler, Christie’s own thinking, recorded in 1935 (as noted by Plain, 2001: 29) was as follows: ‘What really matters is plenty of bodies! If the thing’s getting a little dull, some more blood cheers it up’.

\(^{18}\) Although the victim is not ‘real’ in the sense of being a grievable body, the victim is really dead

\(^{19}\) It is also quite feasibly the way in which Agatha Christie thought of it, consciously or unconsciously. By the time A Murder is Announced, her fiftieth book, was written, she was established as a playwright, and wrote several plays in the 1940s and 1950s. Her most famous play, The Mousetrap, was written as a radio play titled Three Blind Mice as a gift for Queen Mary in 1947, although it was not performed onstage as The Mousetrap till 1952.
or knowledge to solve the crime. Coherent sense is yet to be made of motives for the supposed attempted murder of Miss Blacklock and each avenue of hitherto-imagined dead-ends reveals a new byway, crammed with possible would-be murderers, down which the reliably rational thoughts of the British police are obliged to tread. As usual in an Agatha Christie novel, the portrayal of the police is exceptionally unrealistic, with no interest in or regard shown for police procedure or process and with individual officers depicted as earnest plodders who are surprised, in every sense of the word, by the insights and initiative of the amateur (here, Miss Marple) who solves the crime. The death of Dora Bunner appears to make it more credible to all those positioned as detectives and analysts of the crime that the death of Rudi Schwertz was also a failed attempt on Miss Blacklock.

The victim is the catalyst for the story; once discovered as a body, it has served its purpose. P.D. James, writing of the function of the victim in Golden Age fiction states, ‘Nothing more was required of the victim than that he or she should be an undesirable, dangerous or unpleasant person whose death need cause no grief to anyone’ (James, 2009: 126). Gill Plain challenges the conventional assumption that Christie’s bodies have ‘long been regarded as empty signifiers’ (Plain, 2001: 31) and asks the question: ‘Are Christie’s corpses as bloodless as their reputation suggests?’ Her interrogation of the corpses that ‘litter the pages’ of Murder on the Links and Murder in Mesopotamia discovers that it is ‘impossible to homogenise Christie’s corpses’ (Plain, 2001: 31). This discovery also applies to A Murder Is Announced.

Everyone in the room sees Rudi Scherz murdered and the reader watches with them. The murder happens “on stage”, in the real time of the novel. The body is described in the following manner: ‘Colonel Easterbrook turned him over, felt the pulse, the heart . . . And then drew away his fingers with an exclamation of distaste, looking down on them. They were sticky and red’. The Colonel comments that [Rudi] has shot

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20 A distinguishing feature of Golden Age puzzle plots generally and of Christie in particular is that the plodding police in no way represent or adhere to the actual procedures and practices of a police force, and are baffled by the crime; which is necessarily solved by the clever amateur. In Christie, the two best known of these clever amateurs are a foreigner and a woman, perhaps another argument for her critical relocation.

21 That is, the police, Miss Marple and the implied reader
himself and Miss Blacklock asks if he is hurt badly. The Colonel responds: ‘H’m. I’m afraid he’s dead’ (Christie, 80: 33). There is mention of the ‘grotesquely sprawled figure’ (of Rudi’s body). The reader may imagine blood, given the ‘sticky and red’, but there is no actual mention of the word. However, in the case of Miss Blacklock, there is no need to imagine. The blood from a superficial wound (self-inflicted, although it is only the backwards reading that will reveal this) takes up several inches of space in the text effectively misdirects the reader into accepting the ‘evidence’ that Miss Blacklock has been the intended victim.

Miss Blacklock had moved forward into the light thrown from the dining room and Dora Bunner gave a sobbing gasp. Mitzi let out another full-blooded scream.

‘The blood, the blood!’ She gasped. ‘You are shot, Miss Blacklock—you bleed to death.’

‘Don’t be so stupid,’ snapped Miss Blacklock. ‘I’m hardly hurt at all. It just grazed my ear. ’

‘But Aunt Letty,’ said Julia, ‘the blood.’

And indeed Miss Blacklock’s white blouse and pearls and her hands were a horrifyingly gory sight.

‘Ears always bleed,’ said Miss Blacklock

(Christie, 80: 32)

The other two bodies in the text are definitely grievable, (although bloodless, due to the methods of murder). The murder of Miss Murgatroyd is chilling. She dies at the hands of someone she trusts while they are performing an intimate gesture (tying her scarf round her neck) and Miss Hinchcliffe’s reaction to her murder is passionate. No-one dares to offer Miss Hinchcliffe condolences: ‘Nobody offered Miss Hinchcliffie sympathy or mentioned Miss Murgatroyd’s death. The ravaged face of the tall vigorous woman told its own tale, and would have made any expression of sympathy an impertinence’ (Christie, 1980: 189). Miss Blacklock openly grieves for Dora Bunner, and, according to Miss Marple, grieves quite genuinely. This grieving of the victim by the murderer is a form of doubling. There is also a mirroring in the pairs of relationships
between the women (Miss Hinchcliff and Miss Murgatroyd, Miss Blacklock and Miss Bunner) with one of each pair murdered and the other left to grieve their loss.

Dialogue is adroitly employed to advance the action of the story and maintain suspense with the contrast between the inner workings of the characters’ minds and their conversation revealing information that is skillfully skewed by Christie to ensure the gaps concealed by dialogue create a tangent for the reader. For instance, (Christie, 1980: 98-100) Miss Marple points out to Craddock that what’s worrying him is how to find out if people are who they really say they are. She then details the social and cultural reasons making it difficult to ascertain identity. ‘All you know about people nowadays is what they say of themselves’ (1980: 98). Craddock’s thinking is as follows: ‘Because of the oiled door, he knew there had been somebody in Letitia Blacklock’s drawing room who was not the pleasant friendly country neighbour he or she pretended to be…’ (Christie, 1950: 98-100). The naming of ‘Leitia Blacklock’s drawing room’ and reference to a ‘neighbour’ draws the reader’s attention away from Miss Blacklock herself as being a person who is possibly other than who she purports to be.

Additionally, Miss Marple’s ‘I hope you have warned Miss Blacklock to be careful?’ in the context of discussing the elusive ‘Pip and Emma’ also guides the reader away from considering Miss Blacklock as a possible murderer. 22 Julia and Patrick are clearly indicated as possible impostors (if not murderers) with Miss Marple eliciting the information that Miss Blacklock last saw Patrick and Julia’s mother at a wedding thirty years ago. Later there is further misdirection of the reader when Miss Marple, considering the possibility of Patrick actually being ‘Pip’, thinks ‘the most amazing impersonations did happen. You could get away with a great deal if you had enough audacity’ (Christie, 1980: 149).

The idea of the ease of false construction of identity is locatable and identified by both characters and readers several other times in the text, convincingly layered, displaced and dislocated to ensure that this central clue never points long enough in the

22 Pip and Emma are the twin children, assumed to be brother and sister, of Belle Goedler’s sister-in-law, Sonia Goedler. Should Miss Blacklock die before Belle Goedler, Pip and Emma would inherit the Belle Goedler’s wealth. Nothing has been heard of these twins, or their mother, Sonia, for thirty or so years and the current whereabouts of Pip, Emma and Sonia are unknown by Miss Blacklock.
right direction for the reader.\textsuperscript{23} The police are alert to the possibility of a person or persons pretending to be other than who they may appear to be, but there is no reason for them to suspect Miss Blacklock’s identity, as she is supposedly the intended ‘innocent’ victim. As well as Dora Bunner’s relationship with Miss Blacklock guaranteeing (for both reader and police the acceptance of Miss Blacklock’s identity, the identity of Letitia Blacklock is vouched for by Belle Goedler. Although Belle has not actually seen Letitia Blacklock for many years and there are no available photos that Inspector Craddock can use to ensure he and Belle are talking about the same person, the possible significance of this is subverted in the context, with Craddock requesting if Belle has any photos of Sonia Goedler and further negated by Craddocks’ thoughts immediately returning to the possibilities of Pip and Emma.\textsuperscript{24}

Dora Bunner, in her conversation with Miss Marple at the Bluebird Café, provides two important clues when she speaks of her friendship with Miss Blacklock (whom she refers to as both Letty and Lotty).\textsuperscript{25} The reader is aware at this point that Miss Blacklock has a deceased sister, but not of the sister’s name. The first clue appears in the context of the following: ‘I was surprised, but then newspapers do get things wrong’ (Christie, 1980:118). Bunny has just said that she wrote to ‘Letty’ and then ‘Lotty’ came and took her away (from her impecunious situation). What is a reader to make of this? The obvious inference, that Lotty pretended, and is pretending, to be Letty, is not given time to take shape, with the conversation moving swiftly onto Patrick and his suspicious actions, and to Patrick and Julia and their argument. Additionally,

\textsuperscript{23} In ‘The Simple Art of Murder,’ (Raymond Chandler’s well-known and oft-quoted 1950 essay), Chandler takes to task the way in which the impersonation of Robert by Mark is allowed to persist, emphasising it is incredible that no-one should think to confirm the identity of the dead man or check the whereabouts of the supposed threatening relative. Christie’s story, while relying on similar twists of identity, circumvents these criticisms by providing in the text the personage of Dora Bunner, who has allegedly known Miss Blacklock since their shared schooldays.

\textsuperscript{24} Craddock also mentions at one point that ‘Pip and Emma’ are ‘nicknames’. This is slightly puzzling to a contemporary reader. It is possible that Craddock is referring to AIF slang from WW1, where the term ‘Emma Pip’ was a signalman’s way of referring to the Military Police. (http://www.anecdote.com.au/astr ‘Glossary of Slang and Peculiar Terms in Use in the A.I.F’ accessed July-23-12).

\textsuperscript{25} Theoretically, the notion of a deceased sister provides a reader with a chance to re-read ‘Letty/Lotty’ as other than confusion occurring due to the natural mistake of a dithery elderly lady; later, when the sister’s name is divulged as being ‘Charlotte’, a contraction of which is ‘Lotty’, a reader has a better opportunity to make these links in a backward reading of the text.
Dora quotes ‘And sad affliction bravely borne’ adding ‘It all seemed so sad’ (Christie, 1980: 117) when speaking of Miss Blacklock. Two pages later she confides to Miss Marple that ‘Dear Miss Blacklock is, perhaps, just a shade too trusting’ adding that ‘You and I, Miss Marple, know the world’ (Christie, 1980: 119). Miss Marple immediately realises the significance of this — that Miss Blacklock, as secretary to a financier would presumably have had knowledge of the world — but explains Dora’s musings by attributing them as referring to Miss Blacklock’s comfortable economic situation. Miss Marple does not think that Dora is talking about the other Miss Blacklock, and so neither does the reader. A clue in plain view is smoothly discarded.

Immediately following the first time Dora Bunner calls Miss Blacklock ‘Lotty’ (Christie, 1980:19), the reader is presented with a page of Miss Blacklock’s thoughts about Dora Bunner; how Dora Bunner must not be upset, how Miss Blacklock rescued her; that Dora is seriously ill; that Dora is loyal, anxious, incompetent and unreliable. By the time Miss Blacklock states ‘Don’t Dora, you know I asked you . . .’ (Christie, 1980: 20) there is no reason for the reader (with Miss Blacklock’s musings as to Dora’s shortcomings and fluffy confusion providing enough of a reason) to connect this utterance with the fact that Miss Bunner has called Miss Blacklock ‘Lotty’. In the context of Miss Blacklock’s thinking, for the reader to finish the sentence with ‘I asked you . . . not to call me Lotty’ would be absurd. With the response of Miss Blacklock to Dora Bunner tempered by being situated after the intervening thoughts of Miss Blacklock, it would make more sense for the reader to finish the sentence ‘I asked you . . . not to bother about it’ (that is, were the reader to bother about finishing the sentence at all.) In fact, the ensuing dialogue, focusing attention on advertisement for the murder, draws the reader’s attention away from any interest in the personal exchanges of Dora

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26 Dora does say she is quoting a verse; when Miss Marple includes this in her select list of clues, she changes it slightly to read ‘severe affliction bravely borne’. It seems likely this quotation is from a popular verse of recent time past, possibly Victorian, and possibly even a direct reference to goitre (as the cure for goitre was not long known). It seems certain that it is intended as an intertextual clue, in the same way that the comparison of Phillipa to Rosalind is both a clue and a red herring; in Shakespeare’s As You Like It, Rosalind works in the Forest of Arden disguised as a man, in close proximity to her (also disguised) cousin. The assumption of those looking for ‘Pip and Emma’ is that Pip is male. Christie was fond of quoting or referring to Shakespeare and other well-known writers and in at least one of her novels the literary reference provides a substantial clue to the murderer (when the lines from the Duchess of Malfi are quoted in Sleeping Murder) while in Ten Little Niggers, based on the well-known rhyme, a clue pointing directly to the murderer is in the rhyme.
Bunner and Miss Blacklock.

Clues abound, but their meanings are obfuscated by the pace of the text, the lack of visible connection or links between them (for instance, the clues of false identity, iodine, pearls and photos are all mentioned, several times, in the narrative but unlikely to be meaningfully linked by the reader), the multiplicity of character POVs and the confusion constantly engendered by the mismatch between dialogue and interior monologues.

Miss Blacklock’s opening of a new bottle of sherry, noticed by Patrick (who reports it to Craddock) appears to be a clue, but is actually a red herring. Miss Blacklock has opened the new bottle to deliberately bolster the illusion that she is the intended target of the shooting. Miss Blacklock is also the person who suggests Pip and Emma as possible suspects. The deliberate raising of this possibility as a red-herring misdirects police and reader attention. This idea then effectively doubles back on Miss Blacklock at the end of the story when Pip and Emma are both revealed to be living (under different identities from their real ones, naturally) under Miss Blacklock’s roof.

Another red herring involves Miss Murgatroyd and Miss Hinchcliffe, where, after the police make inquiries, Miss Murgatroyd asks Miss Hinchcliffe (Christie, 1980: 69) ‘Was I awful? I do get flustered’. And receives the response: ‘Not at all. On the whole, I should say you did very well’. This suggests that there may be some complicity between these two women, regarding withholding or misdirecting information from the police.

Phillipa tells Edmund Swettenham that he doesn’t know ‘anything’ about her. This could act as a clue to the reader, signalling that Phillipa is not who she says she is. However, Edmund’s thoughts immediately preceding this exchange overshadow this information as he concentrates on what he (and those reading from his POV) assumes she means—that her grief at losing her husband in the war, and her subsequent dislocation as a widow, are experiences different from Edmund’s, making it difficult for him to understand (ie, to know) anything about her. Not until much later in the story (and not until the actual death of the husband in a traffic accident) is it revealed that it is not grief for a dead husband that Phillipa suffers from but the shame of a husband who was a deserter. This revelation of her ‘secret’ takes away any reader focus on her as an
object of suspicion, and makes it less likely that it will be realised before the intended
revelation that her deception extends to her identity as one half of the Pip-and-Emma
combination. Not only has Lotty chosen to become Letty, but Philippa and Julia are not
who they profess to be; Mrs Easterbrook has some shady secret apparently related to
reinvention of identity; and many of the other characters are plausibly suggested as
possibly being other than who they say they are.

The investigative order and chronological order of the narrative are
simultaneous: the reader is reading the story as it happens. This immediacy means that
the reader is positioned, with the characters to hear the suppositions and conclusions of
characters as they occur. Theoretically, this means the reader has the same opportunity
to solve the crime as the detective presences of the police and Miss Marple. But what a
contemporary reader does not necessarily have is knowledge of the medical treatment
for goitre, or an understanding of post-war England. Additionally, does an implied
reader possess the analytical skills of a Miss Marple? A different set of skills to those
possessed by the police seeking evidence in this case.

The beginning of the story provides several important clues to understand the
way in which loss and sense-making work in this narrative. On the first page, the reader
receives the information that the inhabitants of Chipping Cleghorn are interested in the
news of Chipping Cleghorn, not the news of the outside world. Rather than focusing on
stories such as ‘Bloodhounds seek blonde typist’s killer! Three collieries idle. Twenty-
three die of food poisoning’, (Christie, 1980: 1) the villagers turn to their local paper and
peruse advertisements for dachshunds and sundry items. So reliable is villager interest
in the advertisements that Miss Blacklock has arranged for her murder to be publicised
through them.

In this genteel post-war world, all are subject to some degree of deprivation. A
black market for food and clothes is extremely active, operating outside the sight of
police and apparently controlled by the women of the village. Reflecting the times in

27 There is some controversy surrounding the connection of Christie to issues of everyday life; for
instance Ernest Mandel contends that Christie's inter-war mysteries, (a classification into which A
Murder Is Announced fits in general terms as previously discussed) 'are not a reflection of
contemporary life, but a recollection of Paradise Lost' (Mandel quoted in Scaggs, 2005:48). In the
case of A Murder Is Announced, close attention to the text would seem to argue against such a
reading.
which the novel was written, it’s not surprising that most of the women in the text are not coupled with men and most of them have secrets they are keen to keep. The women are in a majority (perhaps a reflection of the dearth of men after the war—or after both wars, given the elderly age of several of the women?) and are the strong and savvy characters in this story.

‘Place’ in the novel is not primarily the fictional village of Chipping Cleghorn, but the historical time in which this novel was published. The references to the geography of the village (in contrast to the elaborate mapping of Miss Blacklock’s drawing room, and house, spaces integral to two murders) contain no especially distinguishing features; the inhabitants live near enough to walk to each other’s homes; it could be any generic English village. There is no integral or necessary connection between the place of Chipping Cleghorn and the murders that take place there but the historical time and place of post-war rural Britain create the conditions which make it possible for the first murder (which sets in train the necessity for the other murders) to take place. A few years after the ending of the Second World War, this is not yet the prosperous fifties but still very much a post-war world, where the character of an English village is recognizably altered by the continuing displacement of people as part of the after-effects of war. The socio-economic background of post-war deprivation and shortage is a series of devastating losses where personal stories are told to incorporate tragedy without allowing overwhelming loss to determine everything about an individual’s life, although it does, inevitably, shape the trajectory. Cocooned in this mystery are a number of people who have suffered personal loss; Phillippa, Belle, Dora Bunner, Miss Blacklock and Mitzi. Mitzi’s position in the text in particular is significant. She has had to reinvent herself entirely to survive, having left her country, her family and her education and future work possibilities behind (she has a degree in Economics) to become part of genteel English village society. Her filling the position of domestic servant, a cook, in Miss Blacklock’s household reflects the reality of post-war choices available to dispossessed foreigners, and the reality of the depleted British

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28 Scaggs makes the point that Knight suggests the whereabouts of persons in space and time is integrally important in Christie generally (Scaggs, 2005:51); in this novel, correctly locating people in time and space is certainly pivotal to solving of the first murder, which leads to the second and third murder.
workforce of genteel households.

While individual suffering is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify it is the individual in this narrative whose personal story details the most significant amount of loss—of country, family and professional aspiration—who is co-opted to assist Miss Marple unmask the murderer. What is a reader to make of this? Is it simply a matter of authorial convenience—that Mitzi is a servant and so not a suspect—or is there a wider meaning? Can Mitzi be seen to represent an example of triumph over trauma, a tellingly subversive win for women and for the possibility of hope? Is she a symbolic statement of the post-war hope that everything will work out well in the end if mending and making-do is adopted by everyone? She certainly contrasts with Miss Blacklock, whose significant loss of Letitia and her traumatic childhood has led to her murdering people to maintain a lie about her identity, fearful of losing what she sees as her due (the money that was to go to Letitia following the death of Belle Goedler). Significantly, Miss Blacklock has been practising this deception only since the war ended; while Mitzi has been forced by circumstances of war to remake herself entirely. The parallel traumas of Mitzi and Miss Blacklock (life and family taken from them the one through illness, the other through war) act to point to the importance of retelling and, through this, repositioning of traumatic story that is embedded in the text. This imperative parallels the necessity of a reader performing the right backwards reading of the narrative. A story must be re-told to unfold in a way that makes sense of its meaning. Mitzi, through re-creating herself has overcome her trauma, while Miss Blacklock’s attempt to re-write her traumatic narrative by reinventing herself as Letitia has failed. The reason is embedded in the text; Mitzi’s ‘new’ story puts her inside society’s morality while Miss Blacklock’s places her outside it.

The denouement mirrors the murder of Rudi Scherz in theatricality. Inspector Craddock gathers the original group of murder-party suspects at the house. The ‘pointer’ at the fair described by Bunch is activated through dialogue, and kept swinging by established characterisation. Consider the following: ‘She [Mitzi] made one of her

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29 In the lexicon of SS Van Dine's 20 Rules for Writing Detective Fiction, rule 11 is that the murderer is not allowed to be a servant. However, given that Christie's narratives delighted in breaking and subverting these rules, it is unlikely that this would be sufficient reason.
dramatic entrances . . . She was in a frenzy of excitement’ (Christie, 1980:194).

Following this ‘dramatic’ entrance, Mitzi claims that she has seen something the night ‘of the burglary’, makes a statement about the ‘Pippemmer society’ (which has the effect on the reader of confirming the veracity of comments by detectives and Miss Blacklock concerning Mitzi’s tendency to paranoia), then reveals that she saw—through the keyhole of the room she was locked in—Miss Blacklock shoot Rudi Scherz. The reader is positioned to discount the truth of this, especially as Mitzi has been labelled a liar by both the police and by Miss Blacklock.\footnote{[Miss Blacklock speaking to Inspector Craddock] “You will find Mitzi rather difficult, I’m afraid. She has a kind of persecution mania” Craddock nodded. He was conscious in his own mind of … Constable Legg’s invaluable commentaries…he [Constable Legg] had embellished Mitzi’s record with the one word “Liar”.(Christie, 1980:49-50)} If a reader is thinking logically, the question of the absurdity of her seeing anything through a keyhole with a key in it must arise.\footnote{The reader knows that Edmund turned the key to let Mitzi out of the dining room after the first murder (Christie, 2007:32).} The response of Edmund Swettenham is appropriate. ‘But that’s impossible!’ cried Edmund. ‘Mitzi couldn’t have seen Miss Blacklock!’ (Christie, 1980: 195).

With this sentence, reader attention is directed away from Mitzi’s ability to see anything through a keyhole with a key lodged in it. Edmund’s words are intended to trigger the reader’s assumption that Mitzi could not have seen Miss Blacklock as Miss Blacklock, the intended victim, was in the drawing room being shot at.

Craddock’s next words further misdirect the reader with the dual accusations that Edmund Swettenham is both the murderer and the elusive ‘Pip’. Phillipa’s dramatic announcement that she is the ‘Pip’ who stands to inherit should Miss Blacklock die before Belle Goedler, does not remove motive from Edmund, given that he is in love with her. Tension tightens during the following few lines, especially after Edmund shouts: ‘It’s a damned lie’. Immediately, we read: ‘And then, suddenly, a sound rose on the air. It came from the kitchen—a long unearthly shriek of terror. ‘That isn’t Mitzi!’ cried Julia. ‘No,’ said Inspector Craddock, ‘it’s someone who’s murdered three people . . .’

‘The Truth’, as the following penultimate chapter is titled, still leaves the reader in some confusion with Miss Blacklock being caught in the act of trying to drown Mitzi
in the kitchen sink, but fortunately Miss Marple is at hand to explain all afterwards. Miss Marple stands, textually, in the position of an analyst. She concentrates on intelligence, synthesising the information in a way that the detectives in this text, with their focus on fact-gathering evidence and logic, are unable to do. She details how she has solved the crime, stressing the importance of her own ‘backwards reading’ in doing so:

Of course, right at the very beginning, it did seem as though the ideal person—or rather the obvious person, I should say—to have arranged the hold-up was Miss Blacklock herself. She was the only person known to have been in contact with Rudi Scherz, and how much easier to arrange something like that when it’s your own house. The central heating, for instance. No fires—because that would have meant light in the room. But the only person who could have arranged not to have a fire was the mistress of the house herself.

Not that I thought of all that at the time—it just seemed to me that it was a pity it couldn’t be as simple as that. Oh no, I was taken in like everyone else, I thought that someone really did want to kill Letitia Blacklock.


Miss Marple’s disclosure of her processes (including, of course, her recognition of the type of person Miss Blacklock was) takes some sixteen pages, and is likely, with its detailed focus on every clue previously planted in the story, to satisfy the most demanding of readers. Following the wrap of the case, Phillipa and Julia inherit millions after Belle Goedler finally dies, and Edmund and Phillipa marry. The actual ending of the story comes after their honeymoon, when on their return to Chipping Cleghorn they got to Totman’s stationer’s in High Street to arrange for the delivery of their daily papers. Edmund and Phillipa are adamant that they do not want the Chipping Cleghorn Gazette delivered but after they have left the store Mrs Totman adds this paper to their list—of ‘Daily Worker, Daily Telegraph, Radio Times, New Statesman, Spectator . . .

32 This gothic convention of romantic fulfillment at the end of the story is a thematic feature in many Christies, Death on the Nile, Taken At the Flood, The ABC Murders and The Pale Horse among them.
Gardener’s Chronicle’ (Christie, 1980: 220)— quelling her husband’s insistence that the couple do not want the Chipping Cleghorn Gazette delivered with: “Nonsense! You don’t hear properly. Of course they want the Gazette! Every one has the Gazette. How else would they know what’s going on round here?” This ending brings the reader full circle.
Lee Horsley provides the following thoughtful and incisive statements concerning thrillers and gothic novels. As she states in *The Noir Thriller*, two significant noir themes are ‘the destabilising of identity and the inescapable presence of the past’ (Horsely, 2001:230). Horsley further observes that ‘divided identity is one of the shared preoccupations of the noir thriller and the gothic novel’ (Horsley, 2001: 230) and that ‘noir plots turn on falsehoods contradictions and misinterpretations and the extent to which all discourse is flawed and duplicitous’ (Horsley, 2005: 114).

Dissected in the light of the above, the unsettling narrative of *Burial* may be usefully described as ‘gothic noir’. The ways in which central characters relate to themselves and to the world are inversions and reframings of conventions central to gothic and noir texts. Readers of *Burial* will recognise parallels and similarities with the work of Patricia Highsmith and the films of Alfred Hitchcock. But where Tom Ripley, Highsmith’s best known protagonist, feels no guilt at the murders and deceit he has to continually practice to take over Dickie Greenleaf’s identity, the central character in *Burial* is consumed by guilt. Like Tom, who goes from zero to hero through masquerading as Dickie after murdering him,33 Nathan is symbolically remade by his internalisation of dead Elise, who he is complicit in burying in a secret grave. Like Ripley, Nathan is a liar who not only gets away with it, but one who creates a successful and prosperous life in the wake of—actually because of—of his deceit. This central characteristic of Nathan’s is one of the key elements that create and sustain tension in this narrative. Another is the initial introduction of Nathan alongside Bob. Bob is located in the text as an unprepossessing, slightly mad and sinister presence and

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33 Literally, in psychoanalytical terms. Tom is a nobody, belonging and going nowhere until rich Mr Greenleaf sends him to Europe to report on his son Dickie’s welfare. While *The Talented Mr Ripley* ends with Tom having successfully established himself thanks firstly to murdering Dickie and taking over his identity and then to forging Dickie’s will so as to inherit Dickie’s considerable income, the five book Ripley series sees the remaking of Tom as successful (several times over) murderer and man of leisure (including art forgery); in the second book, Tom has acquired a rich and beautiful wife to complement his well-heeled lifestyle.
functions to make Nathan appear appealingly normal by comparison.

The night Nathan attends his boss Mark Derbyshire’s Christmas party changes his life. After a few lines of cocaine with creepy Bob and then with newly-met Elise Fox, who is attending the party as her father is a friend of Mark Derbyshire’s, Nathan and Elise leave the party at Bob’s urging, in an effort to avoid Nathan’s soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend, Sara. They go for a drive down a local lovers’ lane with Bob, and Nathan and Elise have consensual sex in the back seat of the car while Bob looks on. Nathan then goes for a walk, leaving Bob and Elise to have sex. By the time Nathan returns, Elise is dead, ‘of some kind of a fit’ according to Bob. Nathan and Bob cover their tracks and bury Elise. They agree never to see each other again.

Nathan is haunted by the disposal of Elise, whose body is not found. Mark Derbyshire is suspected of being responsible for her disappearance and his career is destroyed because of it. Several years after Elise disappears, after partially rebuilding his own life, Nathan decides to seek out Elise’s sister Holly Fox, after seeing Holly and the Fox parents on television, seeking information about Elise. Holly’s best friend Jackie turns out to be one of the police who interviewed Nathan about Elise’s disappearance. Nathan courts Holly and marries her, all the while keeping his secret.

Holly and Nathan enjoy their lives together for many years, until, one day, Bob (who has had nothing to do with Nathan in the intervening years, and does not know Nathan has married Elise’s sister) appears on their doorstep. The area where Elise was buried is being dug up and Bob is sure her body will be unearthed.

All these years Nathan has thought he and Bob are equally responsible for the unhappiness visited upon Holly and her family. However, after Nathan and Bob have moved Elise’s remains, Bob reveals that he murdered Elise in an attempt to create a ghost. Horrified by this revelation, by his complicity and by the threat to his happy present and future, Nathan contrives to murder Bob. Bob is left in a vegetative state and Nathan, after a few months of marital disharmony, is left to live happily ever after.

With the first question Nathan puts to Bob on the first page of this novel—‘How did you find me?’—(Cross, 2009: 1), Nathan’s attempt to stop Bob coming in the front door, and Nathan’s observation of Bob as ‘hunched over, grinning in the darkness and rain’ (Cross, 2009: 1) it is clear that Nathan sees Bob as a threat. When Bob informs
Nathan that ‘they’re digging up the wood,’ the reader is positioned through Nathan’s reactions to imagine that there is something awful buried in the wood, quite likely a body. The phrase ‘digging up the wood’ (2009: 1) together with Nathan’s ‘feeling’ (2009:1) and Bob’s troll-like appearance, triggers general associations of bodies buried in woods. Nathan’s request that Bob phone him at work and his assertion that ‘you can’t come in’ (2009: 2) has the dual function of showing the reader that Nathan wants to keep Bob out of his personal life and suggesting that Nathan and Bob share a secret which Nathan does not want his wife to know. 34 The fact that Bob simply waits in the rain till Nathan stands back, allowing Bob entry to the house, shows that Nathan does not want to antagonise him, although the reason is unclear, which engenders suspense. Tension is further generated through Bob’s reaction to the many photographs hanging in the hallway. The photos are all of the dead Elise, whose sister, Holly, Nathan has married. However, Bob has no knowledge of Nathan’s marriage to Holly’s sister (and nor does the reader at this stage); which accounts for his reaction ‘What the fuck is this?’ The reader assumes from Bob’s reaction that the photos of the unknown girl are associated in some way with the secret that Bob and Nathan share. The last three sentences of this short chapter signal that the story will have the uneasy feel of a combination horror-ghost story. These associations are generated by the television flickering, by Nathan feeling fingertips touching his ‘nape’ and by Bob looking ‘wrong, like an optical illusion, like a drawing where the perspective and the scale have been altered’ (Cross, 2009:1).

This first chapter sets the gothic-horror tone for the story that follows; a story where the present is overshadowed by secrets from the past. The cumulative effect of the language describing Bob, describing Nathan’s reactions and the dialogue is to locate the reader in the middle of a horror mystery set in the natural world. In Todorov’s categorising of the fantastic tale, Burial is uncanny; fantastic, yet rationally explicable. However, it is not until much of this first chapter reappears in the narrative again (another form of doubling in the text) on page 178 of the novel, that the reader, now cognisant of Elise’s burial, appreciates the gruesome significance of Nathan’s reaction to Bob and Bob’s reaction to the photos hanging in the hallway.

34 Although Nathan doesn’t say ‘instead of talking now’, this is definitely implied by Nathan’s actions
The second chapter is set fifteen years earlier, in the summer of 1993, when Nathan first met Bob. Nathan is on the dole, living in a share household, waiting for his life to change when Bob visits Nathan’s flatmate Pete. Bob explains that he is two years into ‘doing’ ghosts for his PhD, and proceeds to record a true story, courtesy of Nathan’s flatmate, Pete. Pete’s story is about the accidental death of his brother as a child, and about how Pete’s anger on the day of the funeral elicited a vision of his brother as a ghost. Nathan says ‘There’s no such thing as ghosts’ (Cross, 2009: 9). However, when challenged by Bob to explain Pete’s experience of seeing his brother David in the wardrobe mirror, Nathan dismisses suggestions that Pete was mad, seeing things or lying.

In the four and a half years that pass between chapters two and three, Nathan has drifted into a life financed by the media. By Christmas 1997 he has been employed for three years as a researcher on a late-night radio-talkback program presented by Mark Derbyshire. Now twenty-seven, he is a dogsbody for the program, in a going-nowhere relationship with a girl, Sara, whom he once believed himself to be in love with. He decides to finally attend Mark Derbyshire’s Christmas party as a parting gift for Sara, who has always wanted to attend this Z-list celebrity event. Nathan has some cocaine, a rare treat.35 ‘He’d cleaned out his savings account to buy it’ (Cross, 2009: 18) and is wearing a suit he brought on credit. He locks himself in the bathroom to take the cocaine without Sara’s knowledge. He knows the relationship is over, and this taking of the cocaine for the first time in two years may be read as symbolic of Nathan’s seeing himself as a single person again, the drugs representing freedom from emotional ties. At this point in the story, Nathan is an unpleasant, self-centred product of consumer culture rather than an individuated person whose identity is formed through authentic relationship but there is nothing particularly bad or weird about him. Especially compared to Bob, who now re-enters the narrative.

Early in the novel, Nathan’s free indirect speech applies the adjective ‘big’ to Bob four times in five pages.36 At this next meeting at the Christmas party four and a

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35 He later tells Bob at the party that it is two years since he gave up cocaine.

36 'Bob put out a big hand'; ‘a big, scruffy, feline man’…‘Nathan shook the hand. It was very big.’ Nathan looked . . . ‘at big-handed, cumbersome Bob’ (Cross, 2009: 1; 4; 4; 5).
half years later, Bob is again signified as ‘big’. This time he is shambling and shaggy haired as well. The location of Bob in the text as a kind of monster is well established. It turns out Bob is to be a regular guest on the talkshow. Before Nathan realises who Bob is he notices that ‘The shambling man seemed to be controlling the conversation: Mark Derbyshire looked diminished’ (Cross, 2009:24). Mark leaves Nathan alone with Bob, who immediately asks if Nathan has drugs. (A monster and a pre-vampire transforming together?). Bob and Nathan take a bottle of gin and find a room where they snort cocaine. Bob constructs a Ouija Board from his notebook and a mirror that Nathan takes from the wall to facilitate their cocaine snorting. Nathan scatters the letters from the Ouija Board, destroying it after a few questions reveal rambling profanities and messages whose significance eludes him. Bob warns him that he’s done something dangerous. It is then that Nathan leaves Bob and goes for a walk to escape the party. He finds Elise huddled in a man’s overcoat on a bench by the tennis court. This meeting sets in train the moment that will change Nathan’s life. Or does it? Is the beginning of this moment located somewhere long before he meets Elise?

Prior to this life-shifting moment, Nathan is an ordinary young man, living a life of relational mediocrity and working in a superficially glamorous job that consists of hack work, toadying and putting up with a bullying boss. Nathan is both a victim and a transgressor; a weak, not particularly likeable character (though far more likeable than weird, Ouija-board, ghost-believing Bob) who makes a poor moral and ethical choice at a critical moment. This choice, to bury Elise secretly rather than face any possible consequences of her having died as a result of drugs he’s given her (and his false belief as to the truth of what has occurred) then defines Nathan’s life for the next eleven years. The consequences of actions he undertakes while emotionally discombobulated by drugs and sex literally and metaphorically haunt him. He rebuilds his life through a series of lies.

His perception coloured initially by drugs and alcohol, and later by his fear of being caught and blamed for the girl’s death, Nathan does not question Bob’s version of events concerning Elise’s death, either at the time of Elise’s burial or later. The actuality of Elise’s dead body functions to obscures any possibility of Nathan’s re-reading the situation to encompass any other story, and parallels the way in which implied readers
are similarly likely to accept Bob’s version of events. Given the circumstances of
Elise’s death, the focus of the story arc on Nathan overall and the passage below, it is
unlikely that a reader would question Bob’s story. Bob explains that Elise has had a fit,
and suggests that perhaps she had a weak heart and that the cocaine—provided to her by
Nathan—is responsible for her death. Nathan’s immediate reaction is to deny any
responsibility, stating: ‘But it wasn’t my fault.’ However, Bob counters with, ‘We don’t
know that. . . What if you supplied her with the drugs that killed her?’ This is a new
thought for Nathan, and a terrifying one. ‘Oh, Christ. What are we going to do?’ Bob’s
advice is succinct and certain: ‘We put her in the boot. Then we go back to the party’
(Cross, 2009: 50).

Bob then details his plan for covering up their crime, by muddying the timeframe
to disguise their whereabouts through Nathan staging a fight with Mark Derbyshire.
Following the death of Elise, Nathan is situated as a doppelganger, a paranormal double
who scares himself in his own peripheral vision.37 When he leaves the country to escape
himself, he not only takes Elise with him,38 he metaphorically internalises and embodies
the crime scene. Nathan becomes a repository of hidden meaning capable of becoming a
site of revelation. Dialogue and indirect speech work together to create this reading,
functioning to activate the gothic sensibilities of the narrative. The metaphorical
embodiment of the crime scene in his person acts as a technical device to activate the
ghost-story signifiers in the text.

Immediately after Nathan’s participation in the secret burial of Elise, the author’s
ironic ‘What remained of Nathan was wiped out by the sunrise’ (Cross, 2009: 58)
positions Nathan as a vampiric figure. Nathan then goes on to recreate his identity from
the nothing he has become, locating his character firmly in the area of gothic horror
traditions. His own epistemological quest for atonement involves the hiding of
knowledge and truth and his reinvention of himself as an instrument of healing. When
Nathan says to Holly: ‘The thing I’d like to do, more than anything in the world . . . Is to
make things better’ (Cross, 2009: 156), he is telling the truth. Her healing is a measure

37 ‘Things were shifting in Nathan’s peripheral vision. He was scared to look.’ (Cross, 2009: 51)
38 ‘That spring, he bought a rucksack and a six-week European travel pass. But he took Elise with
him.’ (Cross, 2009:79).
of his own, his pathway to redemption.

Although Nathan and Bob have agreed never to see each other again, Nathan can’t escape the ‘inhabited darkness’ that follows him constantly. He is likened to a disaster victim and it is emphasised that he cannot undo what has been done. ‘Since becoming whatever he had become, he left the shower curtain open, fearing whoever might be standing there, waiting, when he opened it again’ (Cross, 2009: 60).

Nathan finds no mention of Elise in the papers. It isn’t till he goes to work that he discovers police have interviewed Mark Derbyshire about Elise, who is the daughter of a friend of Mark’s, Graham Fox. When Mark is associated with the disappearance of Elise Fox through the tabloids, and his career destroyed through it, Nathan is moved to ‘terrified pity’ but knows he will let Mark ‘go to prison for the rest of his life’ rather than let himself be implicated (Cross, 2009: 66).

Nathan is visited by two police officers, DS William Holloway and PC Jacki Hadley. Holloway echoes Bob (and provides Bob’s actual name of ‘Robert Morrow’) to the reader when he says ‘All I’m trying to do is establish a timeline’ (Cross, 2009:71). This echo of Bob’s words has the double effect of reminding the reader of Bob’s well-planned cover-up in the aftermath of Elise’s death and linking Bob with Holloway.

Soon after Holloway and Hadley’s visit, a journalist rings and offers the now-unemployed Nathan money to provide information about Mark Derbyshire. Nathan calls Mark Derbyshire and blackmails Mark into giving him 30,000 pounds not to speak to the media. “I’ll say whatever they want to hear,” said Nathan. “I can’t afford not to.” He didn’t even feel empty. He felt like he didn’t exist.’ When Mark protests that he hasn’t 30,000 pounds, Nathan tells him to: “Sell something. They offered me fifty.” (Cross, 2009: 76-77). It is probable that Nathan lies to Mark when he says that the

39 A reference likely to trigger a reader’s memory of the shower scene in Psycho, and an example of the dialogism and intertextuality that proliferate in Burial.

40 The same DS Holloway who is a central character in “Holloway Falls”, Cross’ 2003 novel. For readers of this earlier novel, the appearance of the morally and ethically compromised DS Holloway is a sure sign that the story will become darker.

41 When Bob is convincing Nathan to become complicit in the burial of Elise, he tells Nathan ‘We have to confuse the timeline’ (Cross, 2007:51).
journalist offered him ‘fifty’, as what sort of gopher on a radio-talk-back show makes 100,000 a year? (In the conversation with the journalist, Nathan is offered ‘half his annual salary’ [2009: 74]). However, whether the reader notices this detail is superseded by the fact that Nathan, following the loss of his job (which in turn followed the loss of his girlfriend and place to live) has blackmailed the same man he knows is wrongly suspected of Elise’s disappearance. This blackmailing of Mark mirrors the way Nathan makes Sara ashamed of questioning whether Mark was involved with Elise’s disappearance.

Mark Derbyshire’s career and life are destroyed as he is viewed as the likeliest suspect in relation to Elise’s disappearance. Meanwhile, Nathan tries to escape through travels in Europe and Asia on Mark Derbyshire’s money—‘But he took Elise with him’ (2009: 79). Elise determines who he is now, and who he will be in the future. After seeing a Hindu funeral in Goa he heads back to London and arrives ‘ridiculous in his gap-year student clothes—this man with no idea who he had become’ (Cross, 2009: 81). Whoever this person is, Nathan sets about providing for him.

The accouterments he buys to furbish his image for the Hermes card second interview signify for Nathan his complete estrangement from his former self, or selves (Cross, 2009: 84). ‘There was no connection. . . Between the self going for the Hermes job, the lost man travelling, and the man in gap-year student. . . he was a series of disconnected dots, a Morse code.’

Nathan immerses himself in the intricacies of Hermes greeting cards, in the details of meetings and marketing and distribution, grateful for the meaningless distractions of this process-driven job and for having to occupy his thoughts with banalities associated with the job as this is ‘much much better than thinking about anything else’ (Cross, 2009: 88). For a few years he successfully manages this life, until in 2001 he sees Elise’s family on tv, while lying on his bed in a hotel room at a Sales Conference. The reader is told that ‘Nathan liked hotel rooms. In them he could pretend that he really was the person he’d made himself into.’ But after seeing the Foxes on television he has the following experience: ‘In this unhaunted hotel room, blue television light flickered and lashed at his face and naked body’ (Cross, 2009:92). Nathan’s nightmare is back.
Following this chance sighting, Nathan obsessively re-reads media accounts of the Fox story and notices that he feels ‘connected’ to Holly Fox, Elise’s sister. ‘It felt like a kind of love, forged in the same smithy’ (Cross 2009:95). ‘Eventually, he wondered if their possible happiness, like the fact of their unhappiness, might not, somehow, be linked. That’s when he decided to find her [Holly Fox]’ (Cross, 2009:95).

With this new twist in the story the reader is reminded of Nathan’s continuing fear of the dark (witness his obsession with the Maglite torches he has never had occasion to use, left in every room, batteries changed every month, spare unused batteries changed every six months) and his fear of mirrors (at night, he hides the bathroom mirror with a towel, while the mirror in his bedroom is secured in the wardrobe). Nathan is so friendless (and family-less, apparently) that he has no plans for Christmas and, when he realises that all other inhabitants of the block of flats are away, and that therefore the building is in darkness, he spends the Christmas-New Year period in a hotel, alone.

He meets Holly by way of pretending an interest in buying a house. (She is a real estate agent). He sees Holly is unmistakably Elise’s sister. The overall effect of her clothes and accouterments is to put him in mind of a department store, an environment similar to a hotel room in its blandness, neatness, orderliness. After she shows him three houses, he thinks, ‘I left your sister alone in the dark’. On returning to his flat, he sees it differently. It crowds him, threatens him. (‘Huddled’, ‘interior angles seemed sharper’[Cross, 2009:111]). He is being actively haunted by guilt in a way he had escaped since taking up the position of sales executive at Hermes Cards Ltd on his return from overseas.

In mythology, Hermes is the fleet-footed Olympian god of communication and in modern society the name Hermes is associated with luxury goods, which in turn communicate the worth of the owner to others who understand the signification of such things. The concepts Seltzer elucidates in his chapter on ‘Vicarious Crime’ in True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity provide an appropriate explanatory framework here. Nathan lives a vicarious life enabled by technologies of ‘communication and transmission’, what Seltzer names as ‘psychotechnologies’ (Seltzer, 2007: 128). The involvement of Nathan first in radio and then in a greeting-
card company, where the signification is mass mediated, can be seen to have several levels of meaning. Nathan has elevated his position in the system, being now a significant part of a system where the greetings are determined and packaged by others who are not significant. Additionally, cards are a trivial, unnecessary consumer good, with the commercialism of intimate individual sentiment making it a meaningless intimacy. Nathan’s unpleasant, lonely and mendacious boss Justin functions not only to make Nathan seem comparatively normal but to show how those living vicarious lives do not need to have experienced such a significantly traumatic event as Nathan has to be part of what Seltzer names the ‘crime system’. By being positioned above Nathan in the hierarchy of the constricting spectacle of post-modernity, Justin’s participation in the crime system ensures he reflects the trajectory that Nathan’s individual path will take—or would have, were it not for Nathan’s engagement with Holly.

Nathan’s romantic pursuit of Holly is an unexpected development that ratchets up the tension in the narrative. On his first evening date with Holly, he works hard to get her to disclose to him. There is a macabre fascination for the (appalled?) reader watching him seduce the sister of the woman whose body he buried in the woods. Their dialogue consists of many instances of black humour, occasioned by Nathan’s (ironically) telling the truth and appreciated by the reader, whose knowledge of Nathan is so much greater than Holly’s. At one point during their date she says, ‘I think you’re a really nice man’ and he replies ‘that’s because you haven’t got to know me yet’ (Cross, 2009: 124).

After the evening of disclosure Nathan becomes obsessed with following Holly, even though he knows that this is dangerous. After he looks up her parents’ address in an old phone book, he imagines Holloway finding the evidence of his looking for their address and the thought makes him dizzy and late for work again.

Holly represents to Nathan the world of jammy dodgers that he has lost, and a

\footnote{In fact, Nathan and Justin's paths do converge significantly as the story moves towards its climax. To escape the reality of the horror Bob brings back into his life, Nathan seeks out Justin as a drinking buddy, obliquely seeking reassurance that he is not doomed to an existential aloneness; a reassurance Justin cannot, due to his essential nature, provide. Just before the story ends, both Nathan and Justin's wives leave them, leaving them with even more in common; however, this commonality is eroded when Holly decides to return to Nathan.}

\footnote{‘Looking at the biscuits, a symbol of something lost, Nathan was overcome with the urge to weep’ (Cross, 2009: 134).}
way into regaining this world. Nathan’s obsession with creating a relationship with Holly leads to a scene that may be read as a scene of horror due entirely to its conventional signifiers and significance. In a romantic gesture, Nathan (not simply uninvited, but rejected as a suitor) takes a magnificent bouquet of flowers to Holly’s parents house. He waits for Holly, taking morning tea with her parents. As her parents begin to hope that Nathan may represent a positive future for Holly, Nathan’s thoughts are these: ‘Nathan couldn’t believe what he’d done to these people’ (Cross, 2009:139). They have invited into their home the man who could tell them what has happened to their daughter Elise, and instead of recognising him as the vampiric figure that he is, they are embracing him as a means of possible salvation for their other daughter, Holly.44

Throughout the story, as in a traditional gothic story, birds are omens. When Holly comes home, she and Nathan take a walk in the gardens.45 Holly says, referring to Nathan’s coming to meet her parents (uninvited) and bringing flowers to the house. ‘It was a lovely thing to do. In a slightly scary way.’ Nathan is watching a bird: ‘There was a bird in the tree. He didn’t know what kind. A starling, perhaps. It watched him with a still, reptilian eye.’. His response to Holly is, ‘I don’t know about that.’ Holly then calls him a ‘liar’. (Cross, 2009:144). The night Elise died, “A flock of starlings erupted in Nathan’s chest’ when Nathan first sees her body (Cross, 2009:48). The passage quoted from page 144, with its mention of a bird in the tree (also a feature of the night Elise died, see passage quoted below) and of a starling in particular, draws attention to itself in Nathan’s not knowing what kind of bird it is in the tree, and then thinking, ‘[a] starling, perhaps’. Nathan would surely recognise such a common bird. His reading of the bird as a starling reminds the reader that the night with Elise is responsible for his present day courting of her sister. The dialogue further elicits the double level on which the story can be read. Holly calls him a liar in relation to his feelings about bringing the flowers to the house.46 The reader’s position of knowing that Nathan’s whole life is built

44 Traditionally, vampires must be invited to cross thresholds, or they are unable to enter people’s homes.

45 As directed by Holly’s mother, as if they are in an old fashioned English novel.

46 In fact, Nathan is probably telling the truth about this, which makes it doubly ironic.
on deception activates the double meaning of the discourse and engenders continuing suspense. When he meets Elise, outside in the freezing cold at the party, their dialogue is as follows:

She said, ‘Hello.’
‘Hello,’ said Nathan. ‘So what are you doing out here?’
‘Getting some air. Y’know.’
He laughed, once. Too loud: a bird erupted from the dark trees behind them. She looked over his shoulder and up, tracking its progress.
‘What’s that? An owl?’
He squinted into the darkness. The Milky Way spread like a distended contrail across the sky.
‘I don’t know. I think maybe it was a crow.’
(Cross, 2009: 35-36).

And at Elise’s funeral, where Holly accuses him of knowing Bob killed Elise, there is a (an appropriate) ‘murder of crows’, echoing his conversation with Elise.

“She said, ‘You knew.’
He kicked at a wet tussock.
‘Knew what?’
That it was him.’
He shifted his weight. Looked at the sky and drew in a long breath. ‘It did occur to me, yeah.’
‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
‘How could I?’
She narrowed her eyes.
Nathan said, ‘I like your hair’ . . . I looked in the mirror this morning. I’m going grey.’
‘You’ve been going grey for a long time.’
He took a step back.
‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
‘How could I?’
He laughed, sudden and hard; it shocked a murder of crows from the bare trees.
They launched into the low sky and described a slow, outraged spiral.”

(Cross, 2009: 289)

This passage is a good illustration of mirroring and doubling that is present throughout the narrative at every level of the text. There is no ambivalence about what sort of bird is shocked from the ‘bare’ trees, an image that draws attention to itself (as opposed to the ‘dark’ trees of Nathan’s meeting with Elise and also because the bareness of branches is surely more accurate technically and more satisfying rhythmically) this time. There is no disjunction of a natural image (the Milky Way) juxtaposed with a mechanical image (a distended contrail, with contrails being the plumes emitted by aeroplanes), no portent of something unnatural. Significantly, Nathan says he ‘looked in the mirror,’ a signal to the reader that mirrors no longer hold their former terror for him, that he is able to view a reflection of his self. The words, ‘you knew’ and ‘why didn’t you tell me’ are also ironically doubled here, and refer the attention of the reader back to the conversation Holly and Nathan had when Holly left Nathan, where Nathan (lying) countered Holly’s initial reaction to the finding of Elise’s remains with, ‘We don’t know it’s her. Not yet.’ Holly’s response, ‘It’s her, you know it’s her’ is followed by her accusations about Nathan’s lies. ‘Every word. . . . All of it. Based on a lie.’ This is true of course, to a further extent than Holly realizes. Nathan response ‘How could I tell you?’ is countered by Holly’s ‘How could you not?’ (Cross, 2009: 279-280).

At Holly’s 30th birthday party shortly after their engagement it is revealed to Nathan and to the reader that Holly’s best woman is the same policewoman Jacki Hadley who interviewed Nathan after Elise disappeared. Nathan lies to Jacki, saying Holly never spoke of ‘it’ and so he didn’t realise (presumably that Elise was Holly’s sister) until it was too late. He persuades Jacki of the foolishness of telling Holly he was at the party the night Elise disappeared, but the re-introduction of Jacki to the story re-introduces an element of suspense, especially as the reader is now fully aware of what the first two pages of the story refer to. In a few short pages, Nathan is married (at the wedding,
Graham thanks Nathan for the ‘life’ Nathan has brought into their home (Cross, 2009: 164) and has persuaded Holly and her parents to re-hang the photographs of Elise they have taken down after her disappearance. He has completely reinvented himself. ‘He couldn’t imagine where he’d been, or who [the day the photographs were boxed]. That person was alien to him, more insubstantial than a ghost.’ (Cross, 2009:174). The use of the word ‘ghost’ and the word ‘alien’ are ironic here, and signify how far Nathan has moved on. He is no longer a man haunted. ‘He seldom thought about Elise. He felt no link to the person he’d been the night she died.’ After some years of disappointment, he and Holly have just decided to try IVF. ‘And then Bob came back, to tell Nathan they were digging up the woods to build a housing estate.’ (Cross, 2009:177).

This is the point where the reader originally entered the story. Bob’s extreme reaction to the photos ‘What the fuck is this?’ (Cross, 2009: 178) is demystified when Holly’s car drives in, Bob’s reaction to Holly’s arrival shows Nathan that Bob thought Nathan was lying about having a wife; that Bob thought Nathan lived alone surrounded by photos of a dead girl, the same girl they buried together in the woods.

Holly’s reaction to Bob (she points out that he smells and asks if he is on drugs) reminds the reader of how eccentric and creepy Bob is, and also how far away Nathan has moved from the person he used to be. Now he is a man of material substance, with a house, a wife and a corporate position. Bob, on the other hand, seems to be a man whose place in the world has moved down rather than up over time. Nathan’s awful realisation that he and Bob live within easy driving distance, that they have been part of a parallel world of the same city sequences of transport and entertainment adds another element of creepiness to the story. When Nathan enters the musty squalor of Bob’s basement (of course) flat, the details of soiled underwear, the evidence of fanaticism and obsession, (the reel-to-reel tapes) and the smell all combine to present a picture of Bob as a failed loner with no connection to the world. The accuracy of this picture is unchallenged by anything that happens or is presented in the rest of the story. The insistence of Bob, after they dig up Elise’s body, that her ghost can be heard speaking on the reel-to-reel tapes functions in several ways. Tension arises as Nathan struggles to convince Bob that Elise is not speaking from beyond the grave, and finds himself hearing her voice himself in the process. The emphasis on the tapes in this last quarter
of the novel reminds a reader of Bob’s taping Peter’s story about the ghost of his brother David at the beginning of the novel, and so elevates the uncanniness of the discourse. When Bob is lying in a vegetative state at the very end of the story, Nathan takes a tape recorder to Bob’s bedside and records ‘the stillness next to Bob’s bed’ (Cross, 2009: 290). Nathan listens to the tape ‘several times’ but ‘never heard Bob’s voice or any other’ (Cross, 2009: 290). Nathan then thinks about playing the reel-to-reel tape he took from Bob’s flat (at the time he attempted to murder Bob), but ‘he knew it would be blank. So he unspooled the tape, cut it up with a pair of scissors and burnt it’ (Cross, 2009: 291). The fact that Nathan goes to the effort of destroying the tape so conclusively despite ‘knowing’ it would be blank symbolizes both Nathan’s destruction (burying?) of any power that ghosts might still have over him and the fact that he is now fully integrated into the social order. Nathan then lives happily ever after: ‘Then he went inside, to his wife and his daughter’ (Cross, 2009: 291). The emphasis in the narrative on these ‘reel-to-reel’ tapes (old technology, reminiscent of film and the cinema) and ending of the narrative with the story of these tapes again foregrounds ideas of life vicariously lived.

When Nathan first sees the collection of reel-to-reel tapes in Bob’s basement, Bob assures Nathan that the reel-to-reel tape recorders are for ‘research’ and that Bob is not taping their conversation. Bob then moves the conversation onto Holly, inquiring if she knows Elise (not realising they are sisters). When Nathan affirms this, Bob exclaims ‘Jesus. You’re sick. It’s unbelievable. Jesus. She even looks like her’. Bob then inquires if Holly looks like Elise naked, at which point Nathan directs Bob never to mention ‘my wife’ again. Bob agrees, qualifying this with ‘You have to admit, though. It’s pretty sick’ (Cross, 2009: 186-87).

The reader, positioned in Nathan’s point of view, may intellectually agree with Bob but emotionally identifies with Nathan. This is entirely Nathan’s story, in every sense that matters. The reader’s perspective is always aligned with his. Feelings, auditory and visual phenomena—all the sensate world is correlated entirely through Nathan’s apprehension of it. When a reader sees Holly, for instance, through her parents’ eyes, or through Jacki’s, this seeing is always mediated by dialogue between Nathan and her parents, or between Nathan and Jacki while Holly is absent, not because
someone in the story other than Nathan provides a point of view in the narrative. The
authorial viewpoint occasionally intrudes but a reader never sees (for instance) Jacki and
Holly discussing Nathan, as surely they would do (and we are told that Holly regularly
has girls’ nights at Jacki’s place). Nor does a reader learn about the tragedies in Bob’s
life until his life is effectively over. This is Nathan’s story to show and to tell. And
mostly to hide and to make up. It is located almost entirely in his consciousness, with
his free indirect speech providing the reader complete access to his mind. This illusion
that the reader shares in Nathan’s consciousness is the most powerful method used to
maintain suspense in this narrative.

The relentless insistence of the discourse in foregrounding words associated with
ghost stories and gothic horrors juxtaposed with everyday scenes of banality, together
with the speed at which the narrative twists and turns toward the end, ensures a forward
momentum for the story which has a reader racing to read to the end.

The way in which loss and sense making work in this narrative is the same way
in which everything works – by mirroring, doubling and reversals. Nathan’s fear of
mirrors and use of mirrors in the story illustrates and foregrounds the idea of
construction of identity being dependent on a self that has lost the possibility of self-
reflection. By constructing his self in conjunction with Holly, Nathan and Holly then
become successful participants in the social order of the crime system referred to by
Seltzer. Their connection through trauma, facilitated by the media (Nathan sees the Fox
family on television and finds their number in the phone book) is another example of the
way in which mirroring is systematically performed on every level of this narrative.
When Holly tells Nathan (after the finding of Elise’s body) that ‘if you hadn’t lied, we
might have been spared’. Nathan can see Holly is wondering if the finding of Elise’s

47 If we did know about the death of Bob’s mother and the fact that Bob dropped out of his PhD five
years before he turned up to tape Peter’s story about his brother David in the beginning of the story,
the effect would likely be not only to render Bob a less monstrous, more sympathetic figure but to
render Nathan less sympathetic by comparison.

48 For detailed discussion of how and why free indirect speech or style works, see David Lodge's
Consciousness and the Novel (Lodge, 2002: 37); or James Wood’s How Fiction Works.

49 The whole narrative could be transposed to the first person - but it is unlikely any sympathy
would be elicited for Nathan with this transposition. Additionally, contrasts between Nathan and
other unpleasant, deceptive and/or mad characters such as Mark Derbyshire, Justin and Bob would
be lessened were Nathan’s voice to be heard in this way.
remains is worth it Holly’s life was completely altered by Elise’s disappearance. (Cross, 2009: 279-281). She changed her planned career and took a job as a real estate agent to be near her parents.\textsuperscript{50} Until she met Nathan the secret she carried within her (of Elise’s disappearance) defined her, made her miserable and a social outcast. Her relationship with Nathan has altered her life for the better.

After Nathan calls the police to Bob’s ‘suicide’ Jacki makes a point of visiting Nathan at home afterwards. Nathan tells Jacki ‘I should have listened to you. All those years ago’, referring to Jacki’s advice that he disclose to Holly his presence at the party where Elise disappeared. Her response, ‘What’s done is done’ works both to indicate Jackie’s position, (that his failure to listen is irrelevant now) and to activate the literary context, the words of Lady Macbeth to her husband after he has murdered, and thus the irony that Jacki the policewoman should so be advising Nathan.\textsuperscript{51} Without explicitly accusing Nathan of attempting to murder Bob (which attempt she assumes has been motivated due to Nathan’s anger on Holly’s behalf), Jacki advises him to ‘think very carefully’ about things the police may wish to question him about. When Nathan assures her he is thinking clearly, her response is: ‘Are you thinking clearly about the second glass of whisky?’, indicating to Nathan and to the reader that she knows the story Nathan has told the police is incorrect. She later advises him that ‘the glass evidence, if it was evidence, was compromised. In all the rush, someone knocked it over. It got broken. It happens’, following this with ‘We’re only human’ and tells Nathan that ‘these things might not even come up’ (Cross 2009: 284-286). The reader is certain Jacki knows of Nathan’s attempt at murder when she advises him to make sure he has some of the temazepam his doctor prescribed handy, in case someone asks him about them. When Nathan protests he has chucked them down the toilet and wouldn’t know where to

\textsuperscript{50} In \textit{The Poetics Of Space}, Gaston Bachelard discusses how a house ‘constitutes images that give mankind proofs or illusions or reality’ (Bachelard, 1994: 17), illustrating this discussion in phenomenological and psychoanalytical terms. Seen in the light of this description, Holly’s change to the job of real estate agent following Elise’s disappearance, then, after she and Nathan marry, her setting up of her own renovating business may be seen to have a symbolic function in the text. In systemic terms, Holly has become a creator and seller of illusions of reality, paralleling the way in which Nathan’s position as Hermes cards sales executive makes him a creator and seller of illusions pertaining to intimacy.

\textsuperscript{51} The use of ‘what’s done is done’ is also an example of dialogic use of language, where the phrase ‘what’s done is done’ is so entrenched and familiar culturally that use of it cannot fail to activate recognition of its original context.
get more without visiting his doctor (as the reader knows, although he told Holly he
didn’t fill the prescription, he used them to murder Bob) Jacki simply says ‘I’m sure
you’ll find a way. You’re not stupid.’ (Cross, 2009: 285-286). This dislocation of the
position of the police in the discourse, from investigating a suspected murder to assisting
in the cover-up of an attempted murder, is another kind of dark reversal. Nathan has
moved from being a suspect (in Elise’s disappearance) to a position where Jacki the
policewoman is his ally.

By the end of the story Nathan is in the position of a Ripley, successful because
of a life built on lies. He has attempted murder to maintain his identity, to ensure the
fiction is sustainable, believable and unthreatened. In every sense that matters, he has
ended Bob’s life. And he feels no guilt in so doing. Holly and Nathan live happily ever
after.
Chapter 4
Garry Disher — *Chain of Evidence*

*Chain of Evidence* fits the succinct definition of police procedural as defined by early commentator on the genre George N. Dove: ‘First, to be called a procedural, a novel must be a mystery story; and second, it must be one in which the mystery is solved by policemen using normal police routines’ (quoted in Scaggs, 2005: 91). As Scaggs points out, this definition acknowledges the debt of the police procedural to the puzzle plot and to the realist style. Scaggs further elucidates the features of the procedural as follows: ‘The urban realism of the police procedural is central to its commitment to social, structural and thematic realism. The characteristic use of third person narration in the procedural demonstrates this commitment at a narrative level…The stress on the methods and procedures of police investigations that characterises the police procedural is another example of this commitment to realism, as is the celebration of teamwork’ (Scaggs, 2005: 93-94). While technically accurate descriptions of the procedural, the generality of these descriptions captures none of the richness of the verisimilitude of the world created through the particular deftness of Disher’s writing.

In *Chain of Evidence*, part of the realist element is the way crime is shown as a natural everyday extension of tensions inherent in modern living. (Scaggs, 2005: 93). Socially and culturally the setting is the diverse array of extremes on the Mornington Peninsula, with this location being integral to the crimes. Disher employs the third person narration that Scaggs names ‘characteristic’ of the police procedural and that James Wood in *How Fiction Works* calls the ‘most habitual of all the codes of standard realist narrative’ (Wood, 2008: 9). In Disher’s narrative the blurring of the thin blue line effectively destabilises dichotomies and locates the discourse firmly in the space of those interrogating social order. With police involvement enabling, maintaining and giving a green light to the operation of a paedophile ring on the Peninsula, there is no way to obviate the social order from responsibility. References in the text to ‘esteemed

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52 The fictional narrative takes place at the same time that the corruption of Victoria Police, especially in relation to aiding and protecting established criminals, is being exposed in the actual world.
members of Victoria Police’ and ‘Victoria’s finest’ are necessarily dialogic in nature and, in the context of dubious actions by police, depictions of police brutality and the revelation of an investigating officer as actively involved in facilitating the crime he is investigating—and the killer of another officer who is on the point of exposing this—point outward to the actual social world beyond the novel, a world where Victoria Police are making headlines for all the wrong reasons.53

Two major geographically separate plot lines evolve, along with several minor ones within the Peninsula-based part of the story. These multiple plot lines and the characterisation of the police themselves contribute to contrived realism. The number of different points of view utilised throughout the novel also assist in creating the illusion of realism, in making available to the reader the inner thoughts of numerous characters in addition to the two main focalisers, Hal Challis and Ellen Destry. This means that the reader can see people from multiple points of view, and witness their actions, their speech and how they are seen by other characters. Due to this viewing point, the reader has more knowledge than any other single character in the book. The sometimes rapid changes in point of view have the salutary effect of obscuring clues from the reader and also, perhaps, of creating, in part, a ‘feel’ of the rapid, jerky forward-backward movement of investigations. This measured pacing creates suspense, with strong buildups to climactic scenes. The involvement of the shooting board, the internal inquiry into the death of officer Kees van Alphen, and the team of police officers engaged in team efforts toward solving the crime(s) further add to the sense of verisimilitude, while private aspects of their lives that the characters wish to keep secret from their colleagues create a space which effectively and believably separates the ‘team’ into individuals.

Chain of Evidence is the fourth novel in Disher’s contemporary Hal Challis/Ellen

53 (Disher, 2007: 180 and Disher These descriptors of ‘Victoria’s finest’ are dialogic due to social, dynamic and historical properties of language; the phrase ‘Victoria’s finest’ cannot be used without the ironic context inevitably having precedence. It should be noted that while crimes of paedophilia were not associated with Victoria Police in the media at any time, a report delivered to Victorian parliament on February 9, 2011 headlined in The Australian newspaper as ‘Victoria’s police force exposed children to risk from sex offenders’ showing that between 2004 and 2010 information regarding movements of sex offenders was not passed on to relevant authorities in the case of 376 offenders, thus allowing these offenders continued access to children. http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/victorias-police-force-exposed-children-to-risk-from-sex-offenders-report-finds/story-e6frg6nf-1226002869639
Destry series, set on the Mornington Peninsula and centring round police investigations in the fictional suburb of Waterloo. Disher has imagined a fictional town into a real location, similar to the way in which Ruth Rendell created Inspector Wexford’s Kingsmarkham. *Chain of Evidence* is the first in the series to present Sergeant Ellen Destry as the main protagonist. Destry is acting in the position of Detective Inspector Hal Challis, detective protagonist of the series to this point. The two points of view that take up the most space in the novel are those of Destry and Challis and chapters are often alternated between them. With chapters often ending on a ‘cliffhanger’, this alternation of point of view is an effective method of sustaining tension in the narrative. Additionally, the switch of point of view between minor characters, most of these other law enforcement officers, serves to build suspense as the actions and thoughts of individual characters are set in opposition to each other.

In *Chain of Evidence*, a young girl is abducted and sexually abused by group of paedophiles. The police investigation, led by Sergeant Ellen Destry, is harried by leaks to local media, lack of information and botched evidentiary procedures. Additionally, there is ongoing tension between members of the investigating team and an Internal Affairs inquiry after a well-known criminal, Nick Jarrett (against whom police have so far been unsuccessful in collecting evidence. Nick is acquitted of the manslaughter of a teenager in the first few chapters of the novel) is shot by police, necessitating an inquiry into the shooting. In a parallel plot, Hal Challis drives his Triumph from the Peninsula to South Australia’s Mawson’s Bluff as his father is dying. While he is there, the body of his missing brother-in-law is found buried at the local cemetery, prompting an investigation into his murder. The tensions arising from his relationship with his father and from relationships with local law enforcement officers investigating the murder combine to present a believable picture of Challis’ situation in South Australia. His uneasy relationship with first-girlfriend Lisa (who turns out to be involved in the murder of his brother-in-law) contrasts with the tensions inherent in his developing relationship with not-yet girlfriend Ellen Destry and these tensions function as another layer of suspense in the story overall. Both plots feature a disappearance—albeit one is

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54 Possibly a thinly-disguised “Hastings”[the Battle of Waterloo, the Battle of Hastings] also a town on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria.
antecedent to the events narrated and one happens in the chronological time of the
story—and both disappearances are resolved by the end of the novel. The Peninsula
story is set in the present, with the reader being briefed on past events as necessary to
understand what is occurring. In the Challis plot past events function to create tension in
the present as their ramifications play out.

Either story could be read separately from the other (with minor modifications).
However, the parallel investigations, especially the often-fractious relationships between
Challis and the South Australian police and the emotional connection between Challis
and Destry, add suspense and complexity to the narrative overall. A habitual reader of
the series pays close attention to Challis’ take on the Peninsula happenings, expressed in
the advice he gives Ellen. This analysis concentrates on the Peninsula story given this
novel is one of a series set on the Peninsula, with Hal Challis’ temporary absence giving
the opportunity for Ellen Destry’s point of view to dominate.

In the opening sentence, the third person objective point of view informs
us Pete Duyker uses three different business names in three different states, signalling
some shiftiness in his character. The second sentence confirms this shiftiness. ‘Pete
Duyker figured he had another three months on the Peninsula before the cops and the
Supreme Court caught up with him again, obliging him to move on’ (Disher, 2007: 1).
Pete Duyker is clearly committed to his criminal activity, which involves photographing
children. Further tension is created as the reader is informed he is shooting through a
Nikon with no film, but that ‘for his other work, he was strictly digital’. Straight after
this, Pete is reminded of a dirty joke from an old ‘Carry On’ movie. Given Pete’s
thoughts, situated in the context of photographing a child, a reader assumes sinister and
unpleasant implications associated with ‘his other work’. When the reader is told that
‘the impulse was on him now, fine and urgent, so it had to be today’ we are prepared for
something bad to happen to a child. This tension is stretched out as Pete drives across to
the Westernport side of the Peninsula where Waterloo is located, observing the
landscape as he drives. A reader learns that Pete is familiar with Waterloo as he ‘already
knew Waterloo to be a town of extremes: rich and poor, urban and rural, privileged and
disadvantaged’. These contrasts parallel the tensions created by dichotomies throughout
the discourse and implicitly suggest there will be recognizable ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’
in the story. There are ‘mangrove flats’, suggestive of an environmentally rich
environment and the Peninsula is ‘giddy with springtime growth’ but there are notably
diseased gums. The environment of the Peninsula looks to be diverse, complicated, full
of the hope represented by springtime, but infiltrated by sickness. Following this drive,
the abduction of Katie Blasko is signalled by Pete’s recognizably clichéd behaviour.
Preparatory to abducting Katie, Pete parks near the Waterloo Show, using a public toilet
‘he’d scouted out earlier in the week’ to disguise himself, complete with wig, black horn
rim glasses, moustache and scientific white coat (Disher, 2007: 2-3). Given their
knowledge of Pete’s character so far, the reader is in no doubt as to his intention. The
first chapter ends with Katie lured into Pete’s van by Pete’s story of her mother’s illness
and drugged by temazepam dissolved in lemonade.

Ellen Destry’s point of view first provides a focal point for the reader at
the beginning of Chapter 2 on page 7: ‘Friday was Sergeant Ellen Destry’s first morning
stretched out in Inspector Hall Challis’s bed. Challis wasn’t in the bed, but she lay there
convinced that some trace or imprint of him lingered’. Immediately a reader presumes
there is an intimate relationship between Ellen and the absent Challis. This
assumption is partially correct (and the development of the relationship will contribute to narrative
tension) but is quickly confounded as the intimacy is revealed as emotional rather than
sexual, with Ellen revealed to be merely house-sitting for Challis. The first couple of
pages provide a description of the location of Challis’ home ‘an old-style Californian
bungalow on two acres of grass along a dirt back road a few kilometres inland of
Waterloo’, and the fact that Ellen is used living closer to neighbours. The initial
description of the relative isolation of Challis’ home and Ellen’s discomfort foreshadows
an emphasis that will re-occur at various times in the novel when Ellen’s life is in
danger, when Ellen’s awareness of the danger inherent in living outside suburbia is
heightened. From the first time we see her, Ellen is fractious and anxious about her life,
seeing the smallest things as challenges; and perhaps with good reason, as a reader soon
discovers. Following Ellen’s struggle with the shower, a reader observes her ‘neck
wound’ in the mirror with her, relieved perhaps to learn it is ‘months’ old. However, the
realisation that the wound results from ‘a hired killer’s 9mm Browning’ adds tension and
understanding to the mix of a reader’s reactions. Ellen has clearly experienced a
traumatic event. The narrative continues in her point of view; Ellen’s first breakfast in Challis’ kitchen focuses on the difficulties inherent in being in a strange place, from the workings of the coffee machine to the layout. She realise that she misses the sound of ambient noise from living with others, and the reader realises that Ellen has recently experienced another kind of personal trauma: ‘She’d lived with her husband and daughter, for God’s sake . . . But that house was sold now, she was estranged from her family and reduced to this, house sitting for her boss.’ Ellen clearly feels her life to be at a low point and, equally clearly, is only just managing: ‘in her worst moments, Ellen found herself biting her bottom lip. She felt an ever-present, low-level anxiety . . . as temporary head of CIU, the job seemed enormous. She just knew that her male colleagues expected her to fail.’ By this second page of the chapter, overwhelming sources of tension are established in Ellen’s life. Ellen’s emotional state changes for the better when she moves outside to eat her breakfast in the sun, although she automatically notices a lack in the environment, seeing the ducks and thinking of the ducklings eaten by a fox. However, this way of seeing is referred back to Challis in Ellen’s mind, as he is the one who told her about the fox and she is wondering about his currently single state when Detective Constable Scobie Sutton rings to tell her that Katie Blasko is missing. The rest of the chapter details Ellen’s interviewing of Katie’s mother and de facto, with brief introduction of Scobie and mention of Pam Murphy and John Tankard.55

The finding of every body or corpse in the Peninsula story is occasioned less by the body found than by what is revealed about the finder(s) of the body, and the spaces of the location in which this story is set. There are no actual corpses in Chain of Evidence until two fifths of the way through the story, on page 147 of this 375 page novel. For the first 118 pages, expectation has built that Katie Blasko’s body will be found. When Katie is found alive this is a different kind of narrative shock for the reader. The discourse around the finding of Katie provides clear illustration of the way

55 Constables Pam Murphy and John Tankard are familiar continuing series figures; Pam’s quick understanding and athleticism, together with her moral and ethical choices provided notable contrast to Tankard’s clumsy resentment and more dubious choices, with the tension generated in their relationship always adding another layer to the story. However, their individual stories, and the contrast they provide in adding tension to this narrative have not been explored here due to constraints of length of this paper.
in which Disher uses realist techniques to sustain tension in this long narrative.
Immediately before Katie is found, Constable John Tankard’s point of view dominates the story. Tankard’s latest dating strategy has backfired and his date has walked out on him. He is alone in the Chaos Bar, watching his car being ticketed by a parking inspector when his phone rings, with the ‘Evening Update’ producer demanding the inside news on the finding of Katie Blasko. Tankard has no idea if Katie is alive or dead. The point of view immediately switches to that of Eddie Tran, successful Vietnamese businessman who has escaped a criminal future and adapted to the Peninsula way of life. Eddie’s work for a business that manages contracts for cleaning emergency-housing properties shows him the most sordid and despairing ways of life that the Peninsula has to offer, and he shares this with the reader:

They literally scrubbed shit off the walls, sometimes . . . The number of times Eddie and the guys had torn up carpets and thrown them out! Eddie, a fastidious man, and luckier than these poor souls, nevertheless found it had not to despise them. Spend five minutes a day picking up after yourself, he’d think, five minutes going from room to room with a garbage bag, and you wouldn’t have to live like pigs. Pizza boxes, dozens of bottles and cans, unidentifiable smears and excretions, mouldy hamburger buns, used tampons and condoms, syringes, the carcasses of cockroaches, mice, rats and family pets, empty foil packets, scratched CDs, overdue Blockbuster videos, bras and knickers, unpaired shoes and earrings, toys, dust balls, skin magazines, hair clips, combs, cellophane wrappers like the husks of strange creatures.

Sometimes it would take days to clean a place.56

(Disher, 2007:112).

56 In Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation, Umberto Eco details techniques he has uncovered during his analysis of spatial descriptions in literary texts. His description is as follows: ‘The simplest . . . form is pure mentioning, as when we say two places are twenty miles distant from each other. The second is detailed description . . . as when we talk about a square with a church on the right and an ancient building on the left. The third form is listing. In a list or catalogue space is shown by an accumulation of the things it contain...’ (Eco, 2003: 104-105).
Following on from the general description of squalor, the extensive list of particular unpleasantnesses detailed in the final sentence—with its mix of ordinary, necessary, benign and unpleasant or dangerous items—has a visual effect compounded by the way the length of the final sentence stretches out to encompass the list, contrasting with other carefully measured and balanced sentences before and after it. The inclusion of items associated with pleasures of food, sex and play, albeit with the pleasurable associations negated by the adjectives ‘mouldy’ ‘used’, ‘empty’, ‘scratched’, ‘overdue’, ‘unpaired’, and all lying amongst ‘carcasses of cockroaches, mice, rats and family pets’ has a cumulative effect. The image of the carcass of the family pet lying amongst the filth and vermin and discarded items that habitually service and enhance these lives is particularly shocking and prepares the reader for the likelihood of finding another sort of body, that of Katie Blasko, in the house of probable horror that Eddie and his CleanSwift colleagues are about to enter: ‘... number 24, a small brick-veneer house set well back from the road amongst blackberry canes and rusting cars lost in chest-high spring grasses’ (Disher, 2007: 113).

The isolation of the house and its unkemptness are further detailed. In the context of the preceding description of the inside of houses that Eddie regularly cleans, reader expectation is that number 24 is the sort of house where a body is likely to be found. The narrative tension both builds and begins a slight dislocation through Eddie’s first impressions: ‘He sniffed experimentally as he approached the front door. Often you could assess the size of the job within by the stench factor. Nothing discernible. Eddie went in first’ (Disher, 2007: 113). At this point in the narrative the reader, positioned in Eddie’s point of view, is waiting for the sight of a body. The fact that there is no smell suggests it will be a body not long dead: ‘No furniture, no crud lying about…the place wasn’t too bad. With any luck, they could be out of here by lunchtime tomorrow... Then he heard a whimper and his skin crept’ (Disher, 2007: 113-114).

The dislocation happens here in two ways. First, it is clear something is alive in this house. Second, it is sound, not sight, that changes the dynamic of the story. This sensory discovery of Katie (starting with Eddie’s experimental sniff) gives the scene immediacy and verisimilitude: ‘The stench was shocking. She was naked and afraid and
lying in her own wastes. She scabbled away from him on a mattress in a room decorated as a nursery, one wrist tethered to a hook in the wall’ (Disher, 2007:114). This scene is witnessed by the other workers (named in the text as an Iraqi and a Somali) with Eddie and the point of view shifts, allowing the following authorial comment: ‘Who knew the trials, heartaches and torture they had experienced and witnessed in their own countries? Yet they rushed past him with distressed and comforting cries and gathered her up’ (Disher, 2007: 114)

The ending of this chapter with these words frames the ordeal of Katie Blasko in its true horror. The unusual phrase ‘gathered her up’ suggests ‘gathering into the fold’, that Katie is part of a community of victims whose terrible suffering cannot be fully known. Katie’s rescue by this group and the linking of Katie to this group through authorial comment contrasts with the cavalier way in which the investigation into Katie is treated by Senior Sergeant Kellock during the narrative. At one point after Katie is found, he physically attends a briefing about the case but absents himself in spirit: ‘Kellock was flipping through and annotating a folder of reports and statements unrelated to the Blasko case’ (Disher, 2007:214).

This contrast, not only between the way Katie is treated by those marginalised by their suffering, but also between the way Kellock treats other criminals (the use of force against Ivan Hennicker to beat information out of him, the deliberate luring and shooting of Nick Jarrett) is a signal pointing the reader to Kellock’s involvement in the paedophile ring. However, in the example from p.214 above, because of the way in which Kellock’s character has previously been represented, because Ellen’s thoughts quickly move on from Kellock, and because the reader knows that Nick Jarrett was responsible for the death of a teenage boy, this clue for the reader is subsumed in the wider discourse of the text and overlooked.

The next body found is also not actually a dead body at the time it is found (although it very soon becomes one), but the way in which it is initially viewed by Scobie Sutton makes it sound like one. This first soon-to-be dead man is Nick Jarrett, the same Nick Jarrett whose trial for manslaughter Ellen attended at the beginning of the story. The reader knows that Jarrett has been lured to his death by Kellock and van Alphen. Scobie Sutton is called to the scene and met at the door by van Alphen and
Kellock.

He’d always been intimidated by them. They . . . had always treated him with faintly amused contempt, as though he were not a man, as though decent men, churchgoing men, were a joke. It couldn’t be contempt, thought, could it? What sorts of upbringings had they had? What values had their parents instilled in them? Scobie couldn’t work them out and was afraid, as they stood there in the doorway, not letting him in.

(Disher, 2007:147)

Scobie’s feelings about Kellock and van Alphen, especially his fear, colour his viewing of the body. Instead of being concerned or afraid about what goriness he might find inside the house, he is afraid of his colleagues. His relegation of Kellock and van Alphen outside the realm of ‘decent men’, and his location of himself inside this category foregrounds the tension and mistrust between Scobie and van Alphen and Kellock and so adds to suspense in the narrative.

Nick Jarrett had apparently stumbled backwards, collided with the bed and then fallen crookedly beside it. He wore overalls and had been shot in the chest. Gloved hands, his left clutching a knife. ‘Good riddance, eh, Scobe?’ said Kellock, crowding him there in the doorway.

‘What happened?’
‘Told you, he pulled a knife.’
Scobie said stupidly, ‘That one?’
‘No, a huge Japanese samurai sword that we put back over the fireplace. Of course that fucking knife.’

(Disher, 2007: 148)

The reader sees the body through Scobie’s eyes. Scobie doesn’t describe the blood, or any details about what Nick’s face looks like. His mind is elsewhere, already wondering about the veracity of Kellock and van Alphen’s story. He doesn’t believe Kellock
suffered defensive wounds. But instead of keeping his mind on the job he is meant to be doing, he allows his personal feelings to direct his actions. Rather than securing the scene and making sure Kellock and van Alphen leave so no evidence can be contaminated, he seizes on the arrival of the ambulance to exit the room himself. He doesn’t even bag the evidence until he returns. This time, he sees something different.

He could have sworn the knife had been in Jarrett’s left hand. He could have sworn that Jarrett had been wearing gloves. Jarrett gasped then, drawing a painful, rattling breath. His hands fluttered.

‘Mate,’ an ambulance officer said, elbowing Scobie, ‘we have to get him out, now.’

Scobie bagged the knife wordlessly, using his last few seconds to run his gaze over Jarrett. There was a cut above one eyebrow, signs of swelling on one cheek.

(Disher, 2007: 149)

Previously, Scobie did not even bother to see if Nick Jarrett was alive or dead. His whole focus was on his own position in relation to Kellock and van Alphen. Later, when Scobie appears before the shooting board, the reader is told that ‘He wanted to admit that he’d been intimidated . . . he didn’t really mourn Nick Jarrett, he realised suddenly. But van Alphen and Kellock were dangerous. They’d killed a man, after all. So he did what most people did and played dumb’ (Disher, 2007: 229). This summary of the van Alphen/Kellock/Scobie situation works to sustain tension through making Scobie’s position more understandable and his character more sympathetic, set next to the fact that van Alphen and Kellock are killers. It also indicates to a reader that van Alphen and Kellock surely are ‘running their own fiefdom’ as the shooting board officer describes it (Disher, 2007: 228). Additionally, the authorial intrusion of ‘most people’ emphasises Scobie’s realistic response as representative of the average man, who hasn’t the resources, power or courage to stand up to powerful corrupt officials.

When Ellen finds Duyker’s body, there is a realistic description of the smell and noise but no mention of her sighting of the actual body. ‘She knocked on Duyker’s door
and the fact that it swung open, and the air was saturated with the odour of blood and the buzzing of springtime flies, told her that she was too late, Kellock had got here before her and taken care of a loose end’ (Disher, 2007: 285). Ellen’s free indirect speech here moves the reader away from looking at the body and towards looking at the perpetrator of the crime.

Later, Scobie reports that Neville Clode has been ‘Shotgunned in the groin’ and that he’d bled out on the floor (Disher, 2007: 364) in the same manner as Pete Duyker had. Scobie’s thoughts provide the reader access to seeing the body in the same way as Scobie: ‘Clode bent in a foetal position in a pool of blood, his private parts perforated from a shotgun blast’ (Disher, 2007:369). From the way in which Scobie’s character has been represented, the reader appreciates that this is precisely the language Scobie would use to describe this body. The contrast between the way in which he views the body privately and the way in which he reports the description of the body to Ellen indicates to the reader that Scobie has an awareness of the dislocation between the way he thinks and the way in which police are expected to speak.

The body that receives the most vivid visual description is that of the murdered police officer, Kees van Alphen, seen from Ellen’s point of view.

Ellen stared at the body. The blood, bone chips and brain matter had slid down the wall here and there, and were beginning to dry. A couple of flies had got into the house. The left side of van Alphen’s skull had taken the brunt of the shot: massive damage that still left enough of the face to confirm identity. (Disher, 2007: 285)

Ellen’s disjointed viewing of the body, noticing irrelevant details—‘A couple of flies had got into the house’—signals her shock, the dissociation that viewing the deceased body of a colleague would naturally lead to. Her observation that there is still ‘enough of the face to confirm identity,’ shows she is still thinking as the police officer that she is. (2007: 285). Her reaction of shock continues to be foregrounded for the reader:

When Kellock had left, Ellen looked for a calendar or diary but found nothing.
Then the pathologist arrived and she watched him examine the body. She realised that her mouth was dry and she wasn’t feeling her customary remoteness. She was well aware that the job had desensitised her. That was necessary. She was quite able to attend an autopsy and cold-bloodedly note the angle of a knife wound or a gunshot, knowing that that information might catch a suspect out in a lie (‘He tripped and fell on my knife’), but right now her eyes were pricking with tears. Van Alphen was a fellow police officer. She blinked and looked keenly at Scobie Sutton.

(Disher, 2007: 286)

Ellen attributes to Scobie some of her own feeling, and, on confirming it is his first ‘dead copper’, she attempts to offer him comfort. However, Scobie’s response—‘I regret every violent death’—is to distance any sense of identification with the death. He then comments about van Alphen:

‘He was a nasty piece of work.’  
‘He didn’t always follow regulations,’ Ellen conceded.  
‘He and Kellock shot Nick Jarrett in cold blood,’ Scobie said, ’and more or less warned me not to investigate too hard.’

Ellen blinked. There were spots of colour on her colleague’s gaunt cheeks, his stick-like figure inclined toward her, draped in his habitual, dark, outmoded suit. She backed up a step.

(Disher, 2007: 286)

The effect of ‘Ellen blinked. . . spots of colour . . .outmoded suit’ is to emphasise the reader is in Ellen’s viewing position, from where Scobie looks like a threatening figure. Scobie’s anger at the compromising position he considers van Alphen has put him in affects him more than seeing van Alphen’s murdered body, and is yet another indication to the reader of the source of Scobie’s ‘low-level indignation these days’ (2007:37). Scobie’s refusal to take responsibility for anything in his life is further illustrated by his fantasy about Grace Duyker, where he projects onto Grace qualities he lacks, imagining
her more understanding than his wife. The passage above points the reader to Ellen’s identification of herself primarily as a police officer, and to the fact that her moral stance is less black and white, more ambiguous than Scobie’s inflexible and narrow point of view. Her appearance before the Homicide Squad inquiry into van Alphen’s death shows her ambivalence and cynicism concerning processes of the law. ‘She’d scarcely registered their names or ranks. Not even gender factored here. The four detectives were interchangeable.’ Their one function is to investigate, to question all suspects and provide an answer to the police board, but Ellen thinks that “truth, or at least the police version of it, was never black and white, A or B, but many things together, merging, overlapping and existing simultaneously. (Disher, 2007: 307). Ellen, as part of the dominant paradigm of those interrogating social order, functions to simultaneously destabilise this paradigm through her ambivalent attitude toward the team investigating van Alphen’s death and to provide the reader, viewing through her eyes, with an insight into its fractures.

Scobie’s appearance before the shooting board officers furthers this insight:

‘Are you protecting Senior Sergeant Kellock and Sergeant van Alphen, DC Sutton?’
Scobie shook his head mutely.
‘We understand that there’s a certain culture in this police station,’ said Pullen.
‘Not sure what you mean,’” Scobie said, his voice betraying his nerves. He was quaking. He’d never been in trouble before. He’d never done anything to warrant trouble. An unwelcome thought came to him that this was punishment for his displeasure with his wife and the feelings he’d had for Grace Duyker yesterday. Could God act so quickly?

(Disher, 2007: 228)

57 Scobie questions Grace in her capacity as Neville Clode’s stepdaughter, bonding with her over her freshly-baked muffins. During the process he discovers the existence of Pete Duyker, Grace’s knowledge of Pete’s convictions for fraud, his photography business and his friendship with Neville Clode. This fantasy of Scobie’s is used as a narrative device later in the novel to provide evidence showing his non-involvement with Kellock, when Ellen redials his phone to check who he has been calling.
Scobie’s conflation of the feelings of fear arising from his appearance before the Shooting Board with his illicit feelings for Grace Duyker shows the reader the magical, anti-causal black-and-white way in which Scobie thinks. Additionally, the bizarrely irrelevant phrase ‘Could God act so quickly?’ points to Scobie’s primary location of himself in a world removed from the world of policing. This location of Scobie in the text implicitly functions to negate any view of law enforcement as being capable of understanding through simple binary oppositions, or black-and-white moral choices. It also makes the following passage all the more ironic: ‘Oh, I think you do,’ said Pullen. ‘A masculinist culture, arrogant, protective. Kellock and van Alphen are running their own little fiefdom, correct? Men like you do their bidding, protect them, cover up for them. A culture that cuts corners, that likes to get a result, whether lawfully or not.’ (2007: 228). The irony of this is appreciated by the reader, whose knows that Scobie is not interested in covering up for or protecting van Alphen or Kellock, (and would certainly argue vehemently against any corner cutting) but is, rather, interested in protecting himself. The use by the shooting board officer of the uncommon phrase ‘masculinist culture’ echoes the previous time it was used, by Children’s Services psychologist Dr Jane Everard, speaking to Ellen Destry in the context of Katie Blasko’s disappearance. Dr Everard queries what good it would have done if she had come forward at the time of Katie’s disappearance. Ellen asserts that ‘we would have investigated’. Dr Everard is dismissive of this, stating: ‘Yeah, sure, males investigating males, just like last time.’ Dr Everard explains that when she saw the television news and realised a woman was in charge of the investigation she came forward, ‘hoping you’ll be more amenable than a man’. Dr Everard then pointedly states that she hopes Ellen is ‘not a part of the masculinist culture of the police.’ Ellen’s reaction to this is to tell herself to be ‘careful’, thinking that it is not Everard’s place ‘to point that out to me—even if I do agree’ (2007: 176-177). Ellen’s position in the text as loyal representative of policing is emphasized here, with her concurrent internal ambivalence an example of the way in which the complexity of characterisations create continual narrative surges forward.

Rather than relying for effect on incongruous or surprise elements of language, Disher relies on the seemingly seamless nature of the way the story is told to sustain
tension through occluding clues and foregrounding red herrings. When Disher does use words that a reader may find surprising or unusual, it is in a context where this is the most appropriate word to contribute to the realism of the scene. In the passage below, the word ‘susurration’ is part of the hypotyposis, and its onomatopoeic impact acts to highlight the other sensual indicators in the text: ‘flared’, ‘lighting’ ‘glow’, ‘drift’, ‘squeaked’ and the barking and the siren, while subsuming the word itself back into the narrative.

That same night, Kees van Alphen went on a prowl of the beaches. He knew them all, the nude beaches, small and tucked away, known only to nudists and a few pathetic peeping toms, the gay beaches, one near the Navy base, another near the huge bayside estate—now carved into a few exclusive house blocks—of an airline magnate. He knew all of the hangouts of the Peninsula’s druggies, street kids, prostitutes, gays and rent boys. He knew that a place could be one thing by day and another by night. He waited until almost midnight, and then he started to make contact. Matches flared in the darkness, briefly lighting hollow cheeks. The susurrations of the sea, the moon glow on it. A drift of marijuana smoke. Feet squeaking on the sand. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked and far away a siren sounded down a long, empty road.

Fifty bucks for a blowjob.

Van Alphen said he could be interested.

(Disher, 2008: 238)

The overall effect of this scene is to mislead the reader as to the purpose of van Alphen. The juxtaposition of ‘prowl’ activates the idea of ‘on the prowl’, often a cultural shorthand for ‘looking for sexual activity’. The selection of beaches van Alphen chooses to prowl—nude, gay—together with the phrase ‘could be interested’ suggests van Alphen is on a tour for his own personal gratification. Disher’s realist style, with its conventions of mimetic representation, including detailed descriptions of surroundings and character, makes it easy for clues to be embedded in the narrative unnoticed by the
reader. Consider the following passage, from Ellen’s point of view, this first time Ellen (and the reader) see Kellock in the story:

She found Kellock, the uniformed senior sergeant in charge of the station, in his office. He was a barrel of a man, his head a whiskery slab on a neckless torso. There were cuts on the hunks of flesh that were his hands. He tugged down his shirtsleeves self-consciously and scowled. ‘Been pruning roses.’

She was about to say that she should have been mowing Hal Challis’s grass, but stopped herself. She didn’t want to broadcast the fact that she was staying in Challis’s house. Just then Kellock’s desk phone rang. ‘Be with you in a minute,’ he said.

(Disher, 2007:16-17)

In this passage, a reader no longer notices the particularity of the detail selected by the author, or the specificity of what is not presented. The picture of Kellock is visually complete and renders him completely unsuspicious. Yet in the following pages, even a few lines later, he is increasingly depicted as a man to whom the opinion of certain others — women, criminals and men like Scobie Sutton — is supremely unimportant. Why, then, has he explained the scratches on his hand to Ellen, to whom he shows no particular deference and, in fact, sometimes condescends to? In the context of his character throughout the novel, this should be a clue for the reader that this seemingly insignificant detail foregrounding the scratches is actually swollen with meaning. But because of the realist style and the fact that a reader is seeing Kellock from Ellen’s point of view the information that Kellock is uncomfortably aware of the scratches on his hand, not because of the aesthetic appearance of his hands but because of what such scratches might signify, is subsumed into the narrative. It is clear that Ellen (and Scobie) doesn’t know how to read him (Kellock); therefore, nor does the reader. From her point of view: ‘His face was like bleak wastes of granite, revealing no emotions…He

58 James Wood, in How Fiction Works, explains how Flaubert ‘decisively established what most readers and writers think of as a modern realist narration’, and details at length how a reader initially has no awareness of how deliberate and careful is Flaubert’s selection of detail (Wood, 2008: 32-38). In a similar way, Disher’s writing conceals its artifice due to his technical skill.
twisted his mouth. She supposed it was a smile. With Kellock you couldn’t be entirely sure, not until he spoke’ (Disher, 2007: 17).

When Ellen is searching Van Alphen’s house, on the premise that ‘he was a man full of secrets’, a secret of her own is revealed to the reader in the midst of her search. She has, over the years, pocketed small amounts of cash and is ‘an expert at this’ (Disher, 2007: 310). Finding the folder of van Alphen’s notes revealing Kellock’s involvement in the paedophile ring hidden inside the hollowed-out television is ironic, with the visual medium hiding instead of showing. This hiding place may also be seen to point to a symbolic function of van Alphen in the text. He is living outside the televisual order, so far outside the system that he does not use or require a television. Nor has he trusted his notes to a computer, instead relying on old-fashioned actual paperwork. Van Alphen’s compete construction of his identity through his job as a policeman contrasts tellingly with that of most of the other characters in the novel, apart from, significantly, Kellock. Although Ellen Destry, Hal Challis, Scobie Sutton, Pam Murphy and John Tankard all identify strongly as law enforcement officials, they all represented as having some energy located in lives and interests outside policing. The fact that the two policemen best known by the reader for bending and breaking the rules (even to the extent of murder) are also the two who appear to have the least life outside policing indicates the potential for abuse of power concommitant with total subsuming of personal identity within the panopticon of watchers. Who watches the watchers?

The fact that Ellen thinks at all to search inside this key mass medium of television also works to activate a reading which resists a simple construction of individuality or individual characters in this narrative, with the place of technology in the novel indicating the possibility of a complex and subversive reading. The television program

59 Given the context, the comment about her expertise may refer to her illegal entry as well as the money.

60 Constable John Tankard, too, is aligned with van Alphen and Kellock in this way, with his bashing of a criminal to get information for personal gain, and his method of solving the problem of his illegal car. Both of them know about his illegal car, and it is obvious Tankard looks up to them and seeks to emulate them. However, Tankard is rendered a more sympathetic and complex character to the reader, with his jealous of promotion of fellow-Constable Pam Murphy to Detective during the novel, his affection for his little sister and his attempt to cathect his car to overcome the trauma he has suffered since being shot all working to place him concentrically outside the dark circle of Kellock and van Alphen, just as van Alphen’s secret investigation into Kellock’s involvement in paedophilia works to place van Alphen outside the darkest circle represented by Kellock.
‘Evening Update ‘relies for the accuracy of its news on John Tankard, who is so out of the law enforcement loop (despite being within the system) that he doesn’t even know if Katie Blasko is alive or dead. During the time of the story, not only is evidence compromised, destroyed and crime scenes contaminated by the stink of corruption, crucial evidentiary procedures are farmed out to a private lab as a cost-cutting exercise, and a relationship of trust is therefore replaced by one of commercial expediency. As in much contemporary crime fiction the site of explanation has been moved from the crime scene where the corpse is found to the crime lab where the corpse is forensically demystified, but in Katie Blasko’s case the demystification is initially a remystification as the evidentiary procedures are rendered worthless. This makes the position of ForenZics in the text all the more significant, given its symbolic position as a representative of the technological world.

The pace of the narrative is sustained until the very the end of the story. The following passage five pages before the end of the novel performs three technical functions, all of which add to suspense and tension in the novel. The realistic actions of the character, Scobie, driving through landscape along roads that form part of the actual world of the Mornington Peninsula foreshadows the (believable) way in which Kellock will die. Scobie has ‘sped away to help the girls in Red Hill’. He is thinking about Kellock, about how much he hates him and how scared he is of Ellen and Pam confronting him. As is habitual for Scobie (and as stands in contrast with Ellen Destry’s careful focus) his mind is not entirely on the job at hand. ‘He rocketed through Bittern and turned onto Bittern-Dromana Road, which had a reputation for a couple of dangerous intersections. If you were drowsy or inattentive, you were alerted by a series of speed humps. Not short stubby ones, like in a suburban street, but broad shallow ones’ (Disher, 2007: 369). But Scobie is listening to the information provided by police radio and by Ellen: Laurie Jarrett has taken Kellock hostage, Laurie is armed and Laurie,

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61 The private lab, ForenZics, is one place where the contamination of evidence occurs; the other is at the Nick Jarrett crime scene attended by Scobie Sutton, where Scobie’s emotional state is responsible for his failure to follow procedure.

62 The slick spelling of the name makes it sound vaguely American (a Z instead of an S) and can implicitly be read as part of a general focus away from forensic procedures so central, in description and emphasis, in many American police procedural shows today and towards human ingenuity to solve the crime.
not Kellock, killed Clode and Dukyer.\textsuperscript{63} Distracted while trying to assimilate this information, Scobie takes the speed humps too fast and has to brake and swerve. This prefigures what happens immediately afterwards: Scobie chases Laurie Jarrett along the ‘stretch between the Balnarring and Coolart Roads’ (Disher, 2007:370) and the Toyota driven by Jarrett hits a speed hump, causing Jarrett to (accidentally, it is implied) shoot Kellock.

During the course of the novel Pam Murphy is separated from the men, from the uniformed officers with her promotion to detective, and from the ‘baddies’ and aligned in the narrative as Ellen’s ally. When Ellen uncovers the extent of Kellock’s corruption and realises that she herself is likely to be a target, Ellen feels the only person she can trust is Pam. Ellen and Pam’s teamwork uncovers crucial information on the way to solving the crime and Ellen also saves herself through her ingrained habits of thinking like a policewoman.\textsuperscript{64}

Several hours after Scobie’s chase down the backroads, Pam Murphy goes home wondering ‘if she’d participated in something that would alter her perception of the job, and of herself. She went home wondering if she and Ellen Destry could have affected the outcome in any way’. Her thoughts foreground the complexities of the position of police in the text for the reader, particularly in terms of loss and sense-making. Although the police are powerfully positioned in society, in this Peninsula narrative they have been unable to prevent the murders of three criminals and two policemen.\textsuperscript{65}

Crucially for Pam, she and Ellen were powerless to prevent Laurie Jarrett from driving off with Kellock. Pam mentally sifts through the pros and cons of her first case and

\textsuperscript{63} Laurie Jarrett has found out that Kellock was one of the men who abused his daughter Alysha Jarrett, as well as being one of the police who refused to take the complaint seriously. Laurie tells Ellen that Nick Jarrett was also allegedly involved in the paedophile ring and the abuse of Alysha.

\textsuperscript{64} Pam tells Ellen that ‘Billy’ is not the same ‘Billy’ she met at van Alphen’s; Pam also realises that the false Billy’s fingerprints will be on the drink can. They are able to identify him from these, and so track down a lead on Kellock (his wife works at a type of shelter for homeless children where the false Billy has been staying). Ellen is saved from Kellock by her habitual focus on her surroundings and attention to detail. This is shown in the scene where Ellen realises Kellock is waiting for her, presumably to kill her, in Challis’ isolated home. She notices ‘a shape slip past one of the windows’ and outwits him by driving on up the road, parking in a neighbour’s driveway and cutting across country to lie waiting and watching in the grass until he roars off on his motorbike. (Disher, 2007: 355-356).

\textsuperscript{65} Not to mention the historical murder of that van Alphen’s methodical searching links to the paedophile gang.
finds no easy resolution to her questions. She sits down to have a gin and tonic and ‘to think about ethics, responsibilities, chance and fate. She played a Paul Kelly CD. His wry take on things suited her perfectly just then’ (Disher, 2007: 371-372). The tensions highlighted by her questions remain unresolved, for her and for the reader, and her listening to Paul Kelly, iconic Australian storyteller, suggests that Pam realizes there are no simple answers.

Scobie, goes home assuming he has caused the death of Kellock. True to the character the reader knows, his first words to his wife are ‘There was nothing I could do’ and ‘It wasn’t my fault’. Assured of this, comforted by his wife, he has none of the questions that Pam does. Instead, he thinks again of Grace Duyker. His resolution is simple and perhaps representative of ‘most people’.

Stories of the individual lives of the police and of police work foreground the place of trauma in this narrative overall, rather than lingering gruesome descriptions of bodies. The reader knows of the shootings of Ellen Destry and John Tankard, and while these are only briefly mentioned and not contrasted during the novel, this knowledge functions to create some empathy and understanding for their characters. Tension between Destry and Challis functions as a narrative device to move the story forward seamlessly from one parallel plot to another. Many chapters end on phone conversations between the two, with unresolved questions about their cases mirroring unresolved feelings for each other. This relationship only has space to develop due the past losses suffered by both characters. They are making sense of their lives in the present through implicit comparison with relationships they have had in the past, as their losses continue to be reworked and resolved during the time in the story. As Hal Challis comes closer to losing his father, with the eventual death happening during the time of the story, he is drawn back to thinking of romantic episodes in his past, through his interaction with old girlfriend Lisa. The revelation that his ex-wife and her lover tried to kill him works to give the reader awareness into his personal story and to foreground his present relationship with Ellen Destry by contrast. Ellen Destry’s realisation in the first chapter of what she has lost resonates throughout the narrative, with the relationships with both husband and daughter still clearly tense. By the end of this story, Challis has had to shoot his old sweetheart to prevent her from killing him, manage various events around
three other deaths (one of them the death of his father) and investigate without the assistance (in fact, despite the opposition of) his South Australian colleagues. His main confidant is Ellen, and he is hers. The relationship between making sense of these losses is also used by the reader to make sense of the story now. The triumph over adversity and anxiety by Ellen at the end of the story, though tempered by irresolution of issues arising from the investigation, functions to bring a sense of completion to the narrative.

‘It wasn’t over yet. Kellock might not have been the end of it: there were surely more men involved, some of them possibly his colleagues in the police. And what of the women? Was Kellock’s wife part of it? And who would look after Alysha now, stop her going off the rails? Most of her abusers were dead but there were various cousins and siblings who’d profited from her abuse. Ellen vowed to see them into jail. That, together with a possibly life sentence for Laurie, would dismantle the Jarrett clan. Peace would reign on the estate for about five minutes. (Disher, 2007: 373)

In this paragraph three pages before the end of this novel, Ellen raises more questions than can be answered, echoing the overall pattern of the narrative. Largely because the ‘monster’, Kellock, has no point of view in the narrative, the emotional impact of the story is less immediately horrible for the reader, and the horror of a paedophile-policeman, of likely more than one paedophile policeman, does not hijack the reader’s attention from the composite of the other stories that make up the narrative. One policeman (and more likely several) may be both man and monster but this revelation is tempered and contained against the Challis/Destry ending of the book.

On the second last page, Ellen’s reaction to McQuarrie’s petty blame shifting, to his attempt to tell the official story of Jarrett being let go results in her standing up for herself. Like most bullies, McQuarrie quickly backs down, saying, ‘Is that how you see me? One of them?’ (Disher, 2007:374). Ellen pushes her advantage to get work taken away from ForenZics and given back to the state lab. When she hears the ‘old, tappety British motor’ and says, smiling at Superintendent McQuarrie, ‘That would be Hal. . .Home’, then feels ‘a little dizzy and apprehensive’, thinks of the dishes she’s left in his sink and the coffee she’s failed to replenish, and the subject of where she will live, the
reader is reminded of her initial anxieties and uncertainties that opened the story, and
simultaneously reminded of how she has, largely, overcome them. ‘At the same time,
she felt buoyed by her achievements, and by an old, familiar stirring in the pit of her
stomach.’ The novel ends with the mystery of Katie’s disappearance solved, the
paedophile ring uncovered, and some order restored but ambiguity and complexity are
shown to be embedded as significant aspects of the dominant paradigm.
Chapter 5
And Then?

In each of these novels, the structure of the story adds significantly to narrative tension, enabling progress forward through the story while simultaneously allowing for continuous loops of backwards readings as readers test hypotheses. While the body in Christie functions as a (possibly parodic) device to get the story going, the body in Burial, is everywhere throughout the story, and the bodies in Disher function to reveal focused information about character and location rather than as focalisers in themselves. Christie uses omniscient narration to tell her story, Cross’s story is told largely in free indirect speech, and Disher showcases the third person objective. These different narrative devices assist each author in developing a particular tone — light, creepy, realistic—for their story. In A Murder Is Announced, Christie relies on the reader’s knowledge and acceptance of certain ‘types’ to effect her characterisation, while the character of Nathan as protagonist effectively appears more sympathetic set against a backdrop of unpleasant shallow characters and because he’s chosen by Holly. Disher creates complex layered ‘realistic’ characters, echoing parallel complexities in the discourse. The location, whether rural suburbia, country-house or psychological space, is in each story part of the problem that needs to be resolved. The solving of the murder turns on the geography of the actual house in Christie, the Burial story is worked out through and by Nathan’s recreation through Elise, and the locations depicted throughout the Peninsula story are significant.

Technically, suspense and narrative tensions are generated through all these techniques. Each story contains a secret that is kept till the very end from the reader, and from some of the characters, and each finishes with a resolved or the promise of a soon-to-be resolved romantic relationship. Each story is capable of a rereading which satisfies the reader in the sense of making good on the delivery of the promises, explicit or implicit, at the beginning of the story. Tensions in the narrative have been

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66 The second chapter of Blood Moon, the novel following Chain of Evidence in Disher’s Peninsula series, sees Ellen Destry and Hal Challis waking up in bed together.
resolved, whether through solving of a problem or displacing it and acknowledging its irreresolution. All the elements discussed work together to create the discourse, the energy of which propels a reader to the end of a crime fiction story.

What makes an ending work? The energy of the ending needs to be both the same and more intense than the energy of the story that moved the reader forward. Whatever technical tricks a writer employs, an ending works best when the reader is emotionally engaged in the story and actively involved in the process of creation. Consummate storyteller and prolific writer Joyce Carol Oates has this to say about the relationship between reading and writing.67 ‘For the writer, reading is part of the process of writing. Even before we know we will be writers, our reading is part of our preparation for writing . . .’ (Oates, 1998: xv). Process is part of craft of a reader as well as a writer, and large part of what makes an ending work. In our ‘wound culture’ reading and writing are salve to the wound as well as causes of it. Words combine to build worlds, fictional worlds that may be held inside an individual to remake their own world, in emotional terms. In The Child That Books Built Francis Spufford provides a hauntingly beautiful story-lover’s articulation of how an addiction to reading fiction allowed a child to psychologically survive the suffering around him through allowing him to reimagine his life. His exploration of himself as reader shows how a reader has, collected in a secret space inside them, all the stories they have read, and all the versions of these readings. The intersection of an individual coming to an as-yet-unread narrative is also an intersection between that narrative and all the narratives an individual has previously intersected. Bachelard, discussing cellars in Poe and in the work of Henri Bosco, explains that ‘Poe’s tales are the realization of childhood fears’, illustrating how one of the tales ‘exploits natural fears, which are inherent to dual nature of both man and house’ and explaining how the geometry of a narrative encourages ‘a reader in the illusion of participating in the work of the author of the book’. Bachelard then makes an interesting distinction between what he names as the first reading and others, going on to explain what he means by the ‘creative work of reading’, the subsequent re-readings of texts. (Bachelard, 1994: 21). It is this type of reading that makes an ending work, in the

67 Joyce Carol Oates recently published a collection of stories immediately recognisable as mystery, horror and suspense: Give Me Your Heart
sense of making it satisfying to the reader. In this type of re-reading, whether it takes place simultaneously as a retrospective repatterning or is in fact a series of actual re-readings like those advocated by Bachelard and described by Smiley in her analysis of her (conscious and unconscious) learning from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the reader comes to realize the place of individual stories in the narrative in relation to each other and to the overarching story that binds a narrative together as a whole. Considered in the context of ideas raised by Bachelard, Smiley, Porter, Gregoriou, Brooks and others the crime novel may usefully be said to be a Jungian artefact, where the meaning of the whole is substantially more than the sum of its parts. The crime novel meets Bachelard’s criteria of a house and the basement and the attic are clearly defined; or at least they must be for an ending to work. An ending will only work if the structure of the house is solid.

The conventions of crime fiction, especially the definite storyline and the ludic element of reading embodied within crime fiction narratives, make it easily accessible to both readers and writers. The tenets of structuralism perhaps go some way to explaining the mysterious unconscious processes that shape a story for a writer, with the assistance of (or sometimes despite) the best made plans. A reader who becomes a writer of fiction has incorporated the underlying structure of story inside them and at some level of planning and writing, they follow it unconsciously. Stories of writers who don’t plot or plan extensive outlines before they begin writing their story abound. Tony Hillerman, American crime fiction author of the acclaimed 17-book series featuring Navajo detective police Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn tells an amusing story of his failure to follow his own (outlined) plots in his essay ‘Building Without Blueprints’, included in *Writing Mysteries*. He claims that ‘In thirty-seven years of writing I have accumulated two bits of wisdom . . . the second law . . . is: *Some people, sometimes, can write a mystery novel without an outline*’ (Hillerman, 2002: 98). Stephen King describes the process of writings stories in his book about the craft of writing, *On Writing*, as a process of locating ‘fossils’ that require ‘excavation’ (King, 2001:193) and a brief perusal of his *Danse Macabre* indicates the immersion he has had in a particular type of story from a young age. Agatha Christie is reputed to have had her ingenious plots worked out in her head before she set pen to page, while Neil Cross has spoken openly
of having to keep writing to find out what happens. Conversely, Garry Disher has begun much writing without knowing the end but when it comes to crime fiction he always plans and outlines.

All crime fiction involves thematically traumatic narrative, whether the tone of the story constantly reflects and privileges the trauma(s) of the narrative at the psychological level of the individual (as in Burial) or whether the overall social trauma is more ‘realistically’ depicted as in Chain of Evidence, where Walter Benjamin’s ‘shock’ as explained by Peter Brooks is seen to constant effect – ‘The city throws up in chaotic and kaleidoscopic fashion unforeseeable experience, brusque encounters with the random and disturbing (Brooks, 2005: 134). In any narrative, there must be a reworking of the traumatic event(s) on the part of the readers and characters to make sense of things. Time after time in crime fiction the characters are ordinary people whose lives are decimated by the random impact of crime. The contrast between the ordinariness of the persons and the trauma that has suddenly (or, perhaps especially in the case of law enforcement officers, gradually over time) become the defining feature of their lives crystallizes and catalyses the discourse and reflects the multiple ambiguities in their lives as they are presented making sense of them through story. Just as do their readers, the characters in the crime fiction narrative seek control over their lives, to feel good, to feel pleasure rather than pain. The empowerment effect of reading a satisfying story may assist a reader to take back some control over a world where is suffering is everywhere expedited and where we are so often, if not actual participants in our individual lives, forced to be spectators, powerless to stop the mass killing, the single random (or otherwise) murder, the drunken Saturday night fight that ends in tragedy. Our individuation is effected through our engagement with this world, a world which is also the world where in Benjamin’s words, ‘the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled . . . is becoming unraveled at all its ends.’ Trauma is mediated and remediated by the television, by the radio, by electronic and ink press. It is

68 The current population of the Mornington Peninsula exceeds the population of Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory, by several tens of thousands. Given that the action of the story encompasses trips to the city of Melbourne as well as areas around the Peninsula other than Waterloo, it can fairly be argued that Benjamin’s term ‘the city’ may be appropriately applied here.

69 In Benjamin’s well-known essay on the art of storytelling and the craft of writing in the modern world ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the work of Nikolai Leskov’
presented to us and we are obliged to watch because it is ever present and all around us everywhere we look.

Crime fiction began rewriting the inconceivable horror of murder in the industrial age early on, with Wilkie Collin’s *The Moonstone* based on the real case (and the real detective) of the sensational and sensationalised case of the times ‘The Road Hill House Murder’. This case was recently reconstructed in Kate Summerscale’s award-winning ’The Suspicions of Mr Whicher Or The Murder At Road Hill House’, a book where the author states deliberately ‘This book is modelled on the country-house murder mystery, the form that the Road Hill case inspired, and uses some of the devices of detective fiction’ (Summerscale, 2009: X111). Seltzer’s discussion of the Crime System in *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* details Poe’s much earlier fictional reconstruction of another celebrated factual case about the mysterious violent death of cigar girl Mary Rogers in New York in 1841. The disconnection and dislocation caused by death in the modern world is both reflected, reflected on and explicated in the crime novel. Underneath the surface of tautly constructed, amusing and entertaining narratives lies a complex discourse, crafted together to create a story where the ending seems inevitable.
Chapter 6

‘Evermore’—A reflection on the process of creation

‘Evermore’ in the form it appears here bears little resemblance to its earliest invocation. The vehicle for this story was firstly envisioned as a parallel psychological exploration of grief, loss and extinction and of the transformative power of story, with especial reference to tales of faerie. Robbie, as The Man With The Storybook Mind was to own and shape the story. It would be his, and largely his alone, a story that engaged the reader through detailed exploration of his psyche as he battled with the overwhelming themes of loss in his personal and professional life, the disappearance of his wife and the disappearance of ecosystems vital to endangered species. It was to be a third-person realist narrative with a police presence active in solving the missing persons crime at the heart of the story; a story with a serious tone, suitably reflecting the thematic concerns. Perhaps a police procedural but certainly a story driven by police investigations into the disappearance of Eleanora and the theft of animals from the Museum and by Robbie’s conflation and confusion of the two.

Early drafts pursued this form and content to a prosaic and unsatisfying end. The minutiae of Robbie’s life, his evolving romance, his re-engagement with the world of the living were all coloured by his fixation on the past and essentially less interesting than that fixation. Even his relationship with his animals failed to infuse the story with life or liveliness. Perhaps it was realistic and ‘true’ to life, but it was depressing, sombre and dark, dark in a way that offered no perverse thrill, redemption or hope for the future. There was no end to his bleak world view, which flattened all the other landscape in the novel. Increasingly, Robbie himself flatlined. When I experimented with giving Eleanora a ‘real’ life of her own, writing pages of conversations between them, the reason why became apparent. Ella was the centre of Robbie’s world and he needed her presence to make him more than an absence filled with appropriate thoughts and
yearnings.

At the same time that I realized the story would not work in its current form, my own experience of what it meant to grieve interminably, cataclysmically and to be bereft of future hope shut down my creative life when first-hand experience of an unsolved homicide was thrust upon me. An unconscious rudder was ripped out from some invisible underwater space. I could not read, I could not write, I could not even begin to re-imagine a serious novel. Perhaps especially not a novel about a man who held on to hope for years and years, and to what purpose? True to life or not, I wanted, needed now, at least the possibility of some sort of happy ending — or at least the possibility of this illusory reading.

In refashioning the story, I naturally experimented with the point of view of Sally-the-killer, both in first person and third person. She was frighteningly easy to write. Her matter-of-fact rationale for killing was chilling, and her narcissistic belief in her entitlement provided a layer of horror. As an unidentified first person narrator, she held all the cards needed to ratchet up the tension and suspense and give me a clearly, easily definable ‘suspense genre’ novel. The ease with which her voice flowed from my jittery fingertips could have been a sign or warning to stick with her, but after spending any time in her consciousness, I felt physically depleted and despairing — so I jettisoned her and allowed her to speak unfettered only after she had been unmasked.

In the midst of this rewriting I began another project, a psychological horror story titled ‘The Nursery’ set against a backdrop of an orchid nursery and missing young women, in a blurry, ill-defined space somewhere between the suburbs and the country proper. Then came the sketching of novel about raskols, New Guinea and birds of paradise (‘Paradise Birds’) — a contemporary police procedural set in Sydney. These stories, both told in the third person, raced along from the first and settled comfortably into the middle distance. These stories, begun in this second part of my life, in the later stages of grieving, were disconnected from me in a way ‘Evermore’ could never be now. But I was stuck with it, in it, by it. I had to find a way to write it. This other writing gave me confidence to think I could strip ‘Evermore’ to its bare bones and find a way to tell the story.
To survive I had to change direction completely. The only way I could write ‘Evermore’ in the time I now needed to was to ditch most of what I’d already written, including all my notes on extinction and rarity in Australian species, and write something that while still technically challenging and conceptually innovative was emotionally far safer — and entertaining in a much more recognisably commercial way.

**Structure and Tone - A Contemporary Romantic Gothic Tale**

Conceptually, the idea of an original gothic suburban Sydney story relying on the conventions governing the telling of traumatic stories remained, with some crucial, game-changing modifications around tone, structure and narrative point of view.

Perhaps the most crucial of these modifications was tone. The sound of this story would be entertaining first, with the unfolding realization of the underlying horror second. In fact, the sound of the story would be trumpeted in the text as a kind of clue and a satisfying fillip for the reader. So, during a one-page Prologue which clearly delineates a naturalistic suburban Sydney, obvious gothic overtones were immediately introduced: native plants holding purchase on shifting soil, angophoras waiting to drop branches, banskias stretching in threat or supplication, cockatoos rampaging. In the midst of this, Eleanora disappears during the fires.

In ‘Chapter One, Robbie Waits’, this tone continues. A reader finds Robbie locked into his study, alone, listening to the music of Saint-Saens. If a reader is not familiar with *Carnival of the Animals* and *Danse Macabre* (two of Saint-Saens best-known pieces), nothing is lost; but if they are, the atmosphere is further heightened. They go on to discover that Robbie is trying to ‘get on’ with a speech he has to write; that besides atmospheric music he is listening to the sound of Ella’s voice (although she is not physically present), in the gloaming. Thinking of ‘the Spirit House,’ drinking wine that looks to him like blood; and hearing her quote the first line from Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Raven* while a dog called Riki-Tiki whines at the door in a howling wind. Additionally, Robbie is pleased that a mirror is hidden by a copy of *The Raven*. Awakened abruptly by the storm, he stumbles to bed in the dark. The location of the story as a romantic gothic
tale set in contemporary Sydney with a tone inclusive of absurdity and horror is clearly signalled. Additionally, Robbie is located in the same space as the ‘scholar’ of Poe’s poem, with his lamentation of the loss of ‘Eleanora’ paralleling the scholar of *The Raven* lamenting the loss of ‘Leonore’; with Robbie’s parrot Raver a kind of parody of *The Raven* who appears as a constant presence to the scholar of the poem, mournfully intoning ‘Nevermore!’.

The next chapter introduces Posie, whose world and point of view are key in providing an embedded clue for the reader to a crucial underlying layer of the story. Posie and Minerva’s fairytale world - the breakfast scene reminiscent of the three bears porridge, the dead magpie incongruously produced by the dog, auguring future death, Posie’s thinking, in relation to the roots of the angophora, that ‘so many things had roots that went deeper than one would first suspect” and her use of words such as ‘nightshades’ and ‘uncanny,’ together with her apparent focus on anniversaries of deaths, activate other gothic references in the text, and create a picture of a particular type of old-fashioned world — a world of fairytale happy endings gone wrong, encased and stuck in grief.

The distinctive tone is set, and, along with the subject matter and the structure, pulls the novel in and out of competing worlds of gothic drama and naturalistic sensibility. The structure of ‘*Evermore*’ is intended to both engage and frustrate, pushing then pulling a reader in multiple directions. At one level, the four narrators, each with their limited point-of-view move the reader through the short time span of the story, and, during this time, back and forth from significant events in each of their pasts. At every point where the reader begins to more fully identify with the characters, a disconnecting thought or event happens. This significantly contributes to the tone, both odd and at odds with the stories being told, and signals that ‘*Evermore*’ is neither a traditional cosy, suspense, horror or gothic novel, although it clearly belongs in the spectrum of crime fiction. The shifting points of view along the same time line mean that the reader experiences the same boredom, confusion, uneasy impatience and meaninglessness of grief as the characters. This means the reader is as disconnected and ill-prepared as the characters for the rapidly escalating denouement in the final quarter of the story, with its classic
technical application of suspense and tension techniques used in thriller, such as short sentences, and chapters, ending on a hook.

The underlying structure of the main story driving ‘Evermore’ is an inversion of a cautionary tale. In cautionary folkloric tales, the purpose of the story is to warn of danger. The structure of such a tale is threefold: The peril stated, the danger disregarded by a protagonist; the death or otherwise terrible fate of the one who ignored the warning of the danger. In ‘Evermore’, Eleanora’s knowledge of Sally’s character proves to be a dangerous thing. However, Eleanora disregards the danger of Sally, even though she knows Sally has killed before. She chooses to see Sally first as her friend, and as a victim, rather than as a monster. By never confronting Sally directly but exposing her through — however obliquely — her writing, Eleanora seals her own fate. Her leaving a copy of the unpublished manuscript and drawing of a ‘cain’ toad with Posie is a tacit admission that she suspects Sally’s true nature. Posie, Robbie and Brett all possess enough knowledge to be fully aware of the danger represented by Sally (and Posie has long suspected her) but all of them fail to recognise the terrible truth. Ironically, Sally is right when she says, right at the end of the novel:

“I knew Posie suspected something but she wouldn’t come right out and say it. Too awful for her!”

She is also horribly right when she sums up:

“People let things happen. Not everyone has the courage to be like me, to take control of their own life and take risks, do and say what they think is right for them. Most people just accept what happens and make a story out of it, whatever makes them happy, whatever they think other people will believe. They let other people get away with their lives, totally invade them!”

Sally successfully invades everyone else’s space and lives for her own ends. Robbie is grateful to her for her sympathy and assistance over the years, and sorry for her having to live with Brett. She has successfully convinced Peter that her husband, Brett, is the sociopathic narcissist, while Clementine sees nothing untoward in her except an unwanted, natural curiosity and social inclusiveness. Sally is in control of her
environment.

This underlying structure pulls the story away from a conventional cosy where the villain is revealed, caught and punished and all live happily ever after. Truth telling in ‘Evermore’ does not have a just reward. Eleanora dies when Sally discovers her plans to publish her novel. Katie nearly dies for telling the truth about seeing cane toads. Bruce dies before he can fully articulate his concern about Sally. Robbie consistently positions himself as someone unable to clearly see danger, sits in his ivory tower contemplating the future, but never planning for it; he’s locked in the past. When he thinks he knows the truth about who killed Eleanora, he sets out to kill the (wrong) person and is only saved from doing so when Posie is unsuccessful in her attempt to kill the right person. Peter told Margaret the truth about her lover but she refused to listen, and paid with her life. His desire to expose the truth has cost him his livelihood and his mental health. Robbie and Eleanora’s writing of ‘Just So You Know’ stories also point to this theme—which becomes explicit in the ending. Sally is neither captured nor punished for her acts of social transgression. Posie and Minerva are not sure she will be. Peter and Clementine are left with a degree of hope about managing the broken pieces of their lives, but not with any certainty that they will succeed. At the end of the story the horror that exists within the community has escaped, rather than been driven out. Robbie identifies the threat and acknowledges its likeness to the invasion of cane toads. The cane toad march is triumphant. She has won — or at least she hasn’t lost.

The mystery of the novel is solved but the ongoing horror still exists, in different forms, in the lives of all the main characters. There is no redemption, although there is still the possibility of it.

Robbie’s location of himself as happiest in the Spirit Room, with his dead animals and in his study with his memories of Eleanora also acts to significantly undermine a fixed reading of ‘Evermore’ as a cosy. In the end, Robbie confirms that he belongs in the Museum—in the past, in a safe, controlled space where things dead things are classified, ordered and cared for, partly for educational purposes, partly for spectacle. His last words are to Eleanora, and the highly ambivalent ‘evermore’ is his last thought. With ‘evermore’ here prefaced by ‘forever, evermore’ it activates echoes of both Keats’
*Endymion* (which quote, the reader knows, formed the inscription on Robbie and Eleanora’s wedding ring) and the Raven’s ‘Nevermore’, emphasising the ambivalence of the ending.

The subject matter of the story, the melodramatic thinking of Posie, the ‘real-life’ horror story of Clementine, Peter’s pursuit of a killer, Robbie’s obsessions and the underlying structure of the cautionary tale all serve to locate ‘Evermore’ firmly in a gothic dramatic world allied to that of *The Raven*.

**Point Of View**

The construction of the story through four interior voices — Clementine and Peter as outsiders, Posie and Robbie as insiders to the central crime — the murder of Eleanora Ravell — functions in three ways: it mirrors the way in which a crime narrative evolves, where the parts work together to become something more than simply their sum; it slows the pace, and it creates a confusion about which direction to look in for answers. A reader’s consciousness evolves along the same timeline as the narrators, and places them in key position to resolve their grief and the outstanding mystery of Eleanora.

The story shared by all the narrators is the story of their ongoing grief. All four of them are floundering with feelings of isolation, boredom and separation from others. Each narrator is stuck in and struggling to make sense of their private grief and trauma and remediate it through and by the stories they tell themselves to make sense of their losses. All are isolated by their experiences, even from those closest to them, trapped inside their own looped and looping thoughts that keep focusing and refocusing on the most important people in their lives, now forever gone from them. Although they seek certainty and answers they are all caught in ambiguous mazes.

These individual struggles slow the pace of the action in the first half of the story, as the narrators dwell on the mundane for meaning, for an answer, seeking the numinous and symbolic in everyday life. At every point where it seems a breakthrough may emerge, the point of view switches to another narrator, or a narrators thoughts circle back on
themselves, frustrating the reader and so creating ongoing tension. A reader, positioned in the point of view of each narrator, echoes their process. All the journeys that begin so purposefully go nowhere at first, in the way of unresolved grief. The promise of dramatic action is withheld and deferred, and the reader lives the frustration, the interminable boredom and blind alleys that are part of the grieving of the characters. Mired, directionless, they stumble and turn on the sport, unable to distinguish between what is meaningful and what is not; unable to distinguish between randomness and cause-and-effect. It is not till the body of Eleanora is conclusively identified and the paths of the narrators have inextricably intersected that the focus of each narrator narrows, that they are able to organise their thoughts into actions. In quick order, Robbie and Posie decide to remove the person they believe responsible for Eleanora’s death, Peter reveals his ‘evidence’ about Brett and Clementine allows herself to be dragged back into life. As the characters literally and psychologically save themselves and solve the mystery through creating stories to make meaning out of things around them, the reader also has the opportunity to make sense of things by putting together a narrative that is the sum of all their stories.

Clues, Red Herrings and Working It Out – The End

The shift in perspective wrought by the different narratorial points of view also adds to tension in the narrative in other ways. Some points of view undermine the reliability and significance of the others. For example, Posie suspects Sally from the beginning, but Posie’s rambling thoughts, and the perception of her by others (a perception which, together with her self-talk, confirms the reader’s suspicion that Posie is perhaps just a little doolally, and therefore not entirely reliable as a narrator) detract from the clear-sightedness of her vision. The existence of other, apparently more lucid, points of view cancels out the impact of Posie’s.

Sometimes the character’s inner conflicts create tension within the character: for instance, Robbie’s secret theft and ‘nurture’ of the stuffed animals from the Museum and his preoccupation with Ella, together with his fixation on cane toads, combine to ensure
his point of view is always skewed to his obsessions and keeping his secrets. While a reader knows that Peter’s quest for justice for Margaret is his driver to action, it is not clear exactly what this quest is, why he needs to pretend to be someone he is not, or why he is determined to have a solid police connection. Clementine and Peter enter the world of Sydney suburbia with horror stories of their own betrayals, stories with an origin closer to the present day. Living in house down the street from the other narrators they are another way in for the reader —like the reader, they see everything, they’re part of it all —yet their own preconceptions and history prevent them from putting the pieces together in the right way.

Dialogue in ‘Evermore’ is designed to simultaneously further the story and give the reader clues or establish red herrings; conversation which seems at the time an exchange of irrelevant meaning is often activated later on in the text. For instance: Katie’s allergy for bees is a natural part of discussion at a picnic, and has two purposes: letting the reader know Katie has the allergy, and emphasising that everyone else present knows as well. Numerous discussions and mentions of cane toads all centre round their invasive and dangerous capacity, and their ability to kill unwary animals and savage their environment. This emphasis on cane toads is a clue in plain sight: the cane toad being the weapon used to kill Eleanora, and Sally, symbolically, acting the part of the toad in destroying for her own ends. At one point early on, Robbie points out that the story of the cane toads can be read as a cautionary tale. Additionally, the constant allusions to the ugly and destructive properties of toads is suggestive of the jealous nature associated with toads in fairytales and literature, which is another clue for the reader. The first thing Brett says is that he feels sick, and he repeats this in nearly every conversation; however, Robbie’s immediate definition of Brett as a stressed loser and whinger, together with other similar perceptions of Brett redirect a reader’s attention from the possibility of Brett being systematically poisoned to ignoring this clue in plain sight. Likewise, the introduction of Sally’s friend ‘Alana’, appearing in the first few pages in an apparently innocent phone call overheard by Posie, makes it unlikely that the reader realises that this female friend is really Sally’s illicit lover, Alan.
Questions are raised and answers delayed about all the secrets held by major characters. Peter’s trail is littered with red herrings; as an ex-police detective masquerading as a magician he’s a fool-hero whose divided identity and mysterious actions mean that a reader will have questions than answers about Peter, and that the theme of false identity (used by Sally to such significant effect in co-opting Brett’s email identity) is foreshadowed in the text. Clementine’s story is a clue within the overall story: her turning of the lazy susan table saves her life and reveals her husband as her would-be killer. This husband-wife scenario is mirrored in the text by the husband-wife of Brett and Sally, with a reader’s attention effectively misdirected as to the threat, at least in part due to Clementine’s story. The title ‘Evermore’, reminiscent of The Raven’s ‘Nevermore’, is also directly associated in the narrative by Robbie with Keats’ Endymion, in relation to the love he and Eleanora have for each other. This use of ‘evermore’ (‘forever, evermore’) is a red herring, in the context of the mystery, acting to misdirect reader attention, perhaps even to the extent of considering Robbie as a potential killer. It is also a statement about the overall romantic relationship Robbie has with his dead wife, about the importance of his projections onto her.

Dialogue, character and place all act as shifty signifiers and signal myriad red herrings and clues throughout the story, shaping the narrative to maintain the trajectory of the story while successfully creating tangents of reading pleasure. The end result is the bringing together of elements in the text in such a way that they combine to form a whole that is more than the sum of their parts - a satisfying and enjoyable crime novel. As previously mentioned, the question ‘what makes an ending work’ is the one against which all questions of suspense and tension are likely to be judged. Does the ending satisfy the reader? Do the backwards readings inflate the narrative with resonances? In the case of ‘Evermore’, at the most basic level, the implicit promise made to the reader at the beginning of the story is that the mystery of what happened to Eleanora Ravell and why will be solved. This promise is kept, and the reader’s enjoyment of the story is expanded by backwards readings. The mystery is solved; but the wider threat to society is not resolved.

If cane toads (invaders who are not part of the natural environment) are not to take over
and ‘get away with it’, something needs to shift in the real world, currently ignoring or not prioritising their march southward. While there is no direct analogy between Sally and cane toads, the analogous features of invasion and acting according to their true nature are enough. There is the possibility of vanquishing them (as Robbie points out, lizards, which are part of the dragon family, eat cane toads) but it remains only a possibility at this stage, and one only articulated by a man who remains in the past. Robbie needs to get out of the Museum. Taking the animals ‘home’ to the Museum is not enough — they belong there, but he does not, and as long as he stays there he cannot effect dynamic change for the future. It is only when he is outside the overwhelming influence of the Museum that he has internalised that he is able to see clearly — sitting in Brett’s loungeroom he recognises Brett’s symptoms of thalidomide poisoning, which have been present during the whole novel.

The use of Carnival of the Animals signals the carnival representation of the story: structured chaos; layered, multi-narrated and encouraging reader participation, the animals are carnivalesque: fantastical and marvellous dragons and lizard water dragons (significantly, lizards, which can eat cane toads without being damaged); dead, stuffed extinct and endangered animals; a talking parrot. The idea of story-making, too, is a clue. If only the reader could be sure where to look. Which of the stories to follow. Another trick of grief, and of carnival: everything is gaudy and loud or flat and unseen: resulting in a focus which is a kaleidoscopic whirl with no clear way forward. A reader paying attention to the detail of the structure will appreciate the chapter headings, the carnival of the animals theme, the consistent and constant way in which the thoughts of each of the narrators turns to the tragic, and dark side and the way in which all characters see danger in nature. The combination of these things urge the novel into the darker space heralded by ambiguity of the fairytale-echoing tone. Readers of mysteries will be looking for the seemingly irrelevant details may point to or become points of major significance as the novel progresses.

Clues and red herrings abound in Posie’s narrative, seamlessly integrated into her habitual way of seeing the possibilities for horror in the world. Her reference to the thalidomide program on the ABC; the gun she carries in her handbag and will finally use
in an attempt to take the life of another human being; the eels; the shark story; her
reminiscences of the meaning of daffodils and dangers of gardens prefigure significant
events that are to come in the novel, while her retelling of her own tragedies creates the
feeling of a fanciful rather than a dangerous world. Anyone who has ever met a Posie
knows they have a story to connect and make sense of every random event in their world
and that such a narrative cannot be challenged or refuted by the kind of logic offered by
those outside the construction. Posie knows she can make sense of things and she is the
only character who is certain of this; although she initially resists the conclusions she
arrives at, and almost loses her life because of it.

Nature in this story is likely to be dangerous and the characters project their sombre,
traumatised and tense thoughts onto the landscape. Robbie feels at one with the Spirit
House full of dead creatures in the Museum. Killer cane toads, killer bees, killer
daffodils, killer snakes, birds, eels; their threatening qualities are always emphasised.
We are reminded that survival is about being fittest and fastest from the time Brett and
Robbie watch the dinosaur movie. The message is that it’s a dark, dangerous,
unpredictable world. Clementine cannot walk to her friend’s place along a suburban
footpath without reading the stormy weather as likely a sinister warning against Brett, a
stranger in a car who offers her a lift. Peter cannot go on a suburban bushwalk without
imagining a sound in the landscape—this is a red herring, as his hearing of a shot, which
changes the way he sees nature surrounding him, is later shown to be a car backfiring.
However, his perception of the landscape as dangerous is emphasised as true when he
nearly sits on a redback spider in the backyard. The Botanic Gardens are a Garden of
Eden complete with snake (metaphorically speaking). Dragons, energising the narrative
in their many different incarnations (as lizards, dinosaurs etc) are symbolic of good luck,
life and determination. From the theatrical dragons of Chinatown that give Clementine
hope and bring Peter and Clementine together to the live water-dragon that is a natural
part of the landscape at the end, the theme of dragons acts to unite the naturalistic and
romantic gothic elements of the text. They remind the reader that luck is partly
perception, partly created by action and that life continues despite the attempts of cane
toads and their relatives to destroy all that is worthwhile.
In Retrospect – ‘Evermore’

What I have learnt from writing ‘Evermore’ is that after the initial vision changes, the excavation of the story, whose shape, form and outline once seemed so beguilingly clear, is hard work, requiring dedication and perseverance. To be entertaining, to keep a mystery moving and alive through some 70,000-80,000 words is tough. And it is sometimes . . . surprising . . . refreshing . . . scary . . . what people make of the story one has written. One reader thought it was probably Robbie who had killed Ella as they found him so creepy; they read his obsession with his animals as reflecting his obsession with controlling his wife. Another was certain the entire story it was Brett. These readings show me that I have done my job; the story has a life of its own.

Evermore was never intended to be a suspense novel or a novel that slips easily alongside the well-known categories represented in this exegesis. It was intended to be an original work set in contemporary Sydney, with a gothic sensibility, a work that could set itself down somewhere along the spectrum of crime fiction. An original work with complex multi-layered allusions, but which ‘worked’ for readers, and could be read as, simply a satisfying, entertaining mystery story. This aim has been achieved. While the term of cosy could —and should, for marketing purposes — be applied, the tone, structure and multiple points of view of the novel set it outside this category. It still fits sensibly in sprawling category of crime fiction, but the technical decision around tone moved this novel away from the country of Disher and Cross and geographically closer to Christie and to Kate Atkinson. It also made me think that the theories of Christie’s popularity due to her effective displacement of horror had considerable validity. Who wants to read about the serious business end of murder close to the time when one has been part of a homicide investigation? No, the only way to manage the
incomprehensibility of a crime of such magnitude when it impacts one’s own life is to approach it obliquely, make almost a game of it, set it on its side so it can be viewed from a perspective that sets it outside, ‘normal’ life, contains it, and avoids detailing the myriad indignities and affronts that can be visited on the body.

In ‘Evermore’ the reader is always positioned as an active participant in the creation of meaning. The truth, according to S.S. Van Dine’s ‘disguise principle’ is hidden throughout the book and is accessible and in plain view to the reader. Deconstruction of the mystery after the ending reveals the clues that sat innocuously, unrecognised in the text. A backwards reading shows how those in the world of the novel could have arrived at the answer earlier, not only by the reader but, and creates an awareness of how gaps in the narrative work to conceal and reveal crucial elements of the story. ‘Evermore’ is an encoding of a disturbing issue of invasion by animals whose nature is entirely self-centred and will therefore naturally continue to destroy others and their environment. Sally is not an alien like a cane toad, but something that exists in the community already. She is all the more frightening because of this.

In editing the novel, I have concentrated on three things that will substantially add to immediacy, and tension and suspense in the narrative, through involving the reader emotionally and more immediately in the first part of the story. These are as follows:

- The representation of, in particular, Peter and Clementine less fully in the early stages.
- The inclusion of Sally’s voice early in the novel, briefly, on a few occasions, as an anonymous first person narrator.
- Editing to remove overuse of character’s names and superfluous conversation that distracts from a fluid reading.

The tension and pace in the second part of the novel previously contrasted sharply with that of the first part. In the last third of the narrative, the short sentences, ending on hooks and moving rapidly from one thought or point of view to the next, created a tight, suspenseful race to the climax. These three amendments will substantially add to tension and suspense in the first part of the story.
Representing Peter and Clementine less fully while still representing them as persons with secrets escaping their past is a kind of withholding which acts to create mystery and tension in the narrative. Giving Sally more space much earlier in the story — albeit as an anonymous first-person narrator — provides a reader with awareness that someone with a narcissistic focus, a studied amorality and a determination to prevent discovery … is associated with the community. By locating such a nameless ill-intentioned person who admits to having secrets they intend to keep in the narrative and revealing their past and future intention to harm, but little of their motivation or methodology, tension and suspense in the story is immediately increased.

The first of the paragraphs below is included immediately after all four narrators have first spoken, at the end of Chapter 4:

‘Who can ever say where the end of anything starts? People always look for clues in history but those clues aren’t necessarily there to be found. Or if they are their meaning isn’t what you might think. There’s always, in my experience, lot of hiding going on, a lot of randomness, a lot of luck, good and bad depending on your point of view. Until you decide to take control of your own destiny. Which can mean making some tough decisions, in my experience. Some things, or somebody, often has to go.

I have decided to write this all down, so I’m in control. Sometimes lately I’m so angry that I’m afraid I’m going to let something out at the wrong moment. So I’m going to discipline myself to organize my thoughts. Get it out of me, out into the universe, making sense of it in black and white. Not let any funny feelings get the better of me. I’m done with all that now. No more reacting to the moment and relying on the universe for solutions. Even if they might be particularly appropriate ones! No more panicking and making do with whatever’s available. No more complicated killing, of anything. Hands free, that’s the way of my future. Fail to plan – plan to fail. It’s become my mantra. It’s been a long time . . . all the waiting, and organizing it all . . . but it’s nearly time now and I’m sticking to my plan. Fingers crossed nothing unexpected happens.’

The following two paragraphs come later, both appearing before the attempt on Katie’s
‘I’ve always been a good liar. Perhaps because I don’t put the stock in truth telling that most people I know do. I worked it out pretty quickly, what would wash and what wouldn’t. As Carl Jung said, the greatest gift you can give yourself is a little bit of your own attention. I agree with that, in principle; I’d just change the sentiment ever so slightly and say the greatest gift you can give yourself is your full attention, full stop. I mean, let’s be honest: that’s really what everyone wants, whatever they say. None of us ever really grow up, though some are better at looking like they have. Like me. Some of us are better secret-keepers, too. I’m particularly good at keeping secrets, and at the same time looking like I have none. That’s the trick to it, really. We all have them, but only some of us have what it takes to hide them in plain sight. It’s a matter of survival.’

‘After all this time, someone finding her came as a real shock. I don’t think anyone is stupid enough to believe that she crawled into a cave by herself. Therefore, they’ll be wondering what actually happened. Not that they’ll ever be able to work that out. I shouldn’t think. But they’ll be looking . . . . It’s lucky my plans are already so far advanced. Bringing them forward just a little will be no problem . . . I don’t really want to . . . but loose ends are dangerous. I’ll have to work something out.’

The inclusion of these fragments early in the story tightens and directs the focus of the reader to the fact that someone in the story is not who they appear to be; that one of the insiders is an outsider, a destroyer, a monster. This has the overall effect of heightening tension and suspense.

The third change is a simple one of craft. When ‘Evermore’ was first ‘complete’, I was too close to recognize the clunky joins in the walls and the mis-matched tiles on the floor. The Robbie of ‘The Man With The Storybook Mind’ had too much control over the carpentry. Having finally given up the ghosts regretfully lingering about the non-telling of that story, I am pleased to have created an entertainment that, for me personally, is a psychological triumph: ‘Evermore’.
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The Secret History

EVERMORE

J.M. Taylor
**Prologue**

Down where sandstone meets with shale, indigenous plants have first purchase on the shifting soil and turpentine trees still grow tall and true as nature planned. They escaped the horror that changed so much landscape all those years ago.

Salmon-coloured gums wait to drop their branches in the wind and banksias stretch their gnarly limbs as if in threat or supplication. Cockatoos rampage daily in white and yellow swirls and galahs strut pink and grey across the smooth green of the oval. Lorikeets and rosellas blur every day with colour while the black-and-white of magpies parade about their territory. Shy currawongs call and kookaburras cackle, snap and flop snakes from their beaks while people wake to temperate, promising dawns.

It was nearly ten years since Eleanora Ravell had vanished from this place. She had disappeared one afternoon, sometime between lunch and dinner. The family car was found parked at the back of the pub near the railway station, just where Eleanora would park were she catching a train, but no-one remembered her buying a ticket. No-one remembered seeing her at all.

When the fires came, Eleanora had been missing just under a week. Surely she would be in touch now. With the fires making front-page news in every state throughout Australia, and even overseas? With Lane Cove National Park on every channel on the evening news?

But Eleanora did not call. She did not write. She stayed away. And as the days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months and years, and the baby grew up not knowing her mother, everybody came to accept that something indisputably, incontrovertibly, bad had happened to Eleanora.

Where was Eleanora now?
CHAPTER ONE
 Robbie Waits

Where was Ella now?

_He sat in the gloaming, waiting for her to come home._ The sound of her voice filled his hearing, overwhelming the music of Saint-Saens. Robbie slid onto the floor, eyes on the long stemmed glass in his hand. It was near empty again. Time to get on. This was why he had locked himself into the study, alone. The wineglass tilted and a trickle slicked through his fingers. He licked it off. The taste was metallic and the liquid looked like blood in the darkening light. His stomach lurched.

He needed to hear her more clearly. He turned the music down. _Robbie! Back on the job, shut the storybook, put those Spirit House thoughts away!_ He looked around the room. He was trying. He’d closed the cupboard door so as not to be distracted. So as to keep his mind on what he had to say. What he had to write. But it was no good. His scientific self was sleeping, curled up in some secret safe place of dreams.

_‘Once upon a midnight dreary …’_ From where he sat, he could read those first lines easily. They could have been written for so many of the nights that he had sat here without her.

It was Ella who had found the poem so appealing, had decorated the stanzas with her distinctive hand.

“I don’t want a mirror in here, it’s too much,” she’d said. “This will work better.” She’d hung the whole creation over the sliding door of the wardrobe and now the mirror-door acted as a frame for the poem.

Robbie was glad she’d hidden the mirror.

It was raining again, a slow-and-steady-wins-the-race kind of rain. The wind howled and Riki Tiki whined at the door. Robbie’s head dropped slowly, inexorably to his chest.

When he woke, the rain was beating against the windows and the wind was thrashing trees into the glass. Robbie stumbled to bed in the dark.
Posie looked out at the vegetable patch as she stirred the porridge. She felt quite proud of the neat rows, the slender palings, the protective netting. No greedy possums were going to eat her green beans. She must call the plumber, that nice young man, the roots of that liquidambar were taking over. So many things had roots that went so much deeper than one would first suspect. Last year it had been angophora roots and the chickens, who would have thought it. She would let the chickens out later, or perhaps tomorrow if she got back too late today. And how providential that it had rained overnight, and looked set to rain again today; she wouldn’t need to water this morning. Very fortunate indeed, considering she had forgotten to set her alarm. But there was still plenty of time to catch the train.

The resident magpie sat in the angophora and warbled its beautiful song and Posie smiled, until a flurry at ground level caught her eye. “Oh, that naughty dog, there he goes, digging in the garden again,” she said. “In the exact spot I planted the nightshades. It’s uncanny.” She rapped on the pane. “Basky!”

“He won’t hear you,” said Minerva, turning the teapot on its trivet. “He’s born to dig.” She picked up the milk jug in one hand, the teapot in the other, poured deftly into two Royal Worcester teacups.

Posie rapped on the glass again. The labrador paused and lifted his chocolate-coloured head, snifffing; then he tore across the vegetable patch and round the corner of the house to the front yard.

“Oh!” said Posie, seeing the reason for his haste. “Sally’s out the front. With Snuffles.”

Reaching into a half-open drawer, she took out an envelope. “I’ll be just a minute, keep an eye on the porridge, dear.” She tightened the faded blue belt of her dressing gown as she opened the side door.

“Basky!” Hurrying up the side path, Posie waved at the woman leaning languidly into the banksia while talking on a mobile phone.
The two dogs sniffed and licked one another, and then … “Basky! Down!” shouted Posie. But the outline of a muddy pawprint was embarrassingly visible on Sally’s white shirt. “Don’t let him jump on you, dear, he is so naughty! Down, Basky!” and to Posie’s surprise the labrador sank to his haunches, whining and thumping his tail with vigour. Then the golden retriever licked a chocolate ear and the dogs were off, growling and barking as they chased in circles across the garden.

“’You too, Alana, bye,’” Sally pushed the phone into her jeans pocket, flicked her hair back over her shoulders. “I’m standing under here in case any of those horrible magpies come swooping around.”

Posie shook her head. “That’s only nesting season,” she said. “When they’re protecting their babies.” The eyes of the two women met.

Posie said, “Sally, dear, I’m so glad to catch you, we just wanted you to know — we remember.” Posie handed Sally the envelope, and clasped the hand of the other woman between both her own.

“Oh Posie,” Sally’s voice was little more than a whisper. She pulled her hand away, covered her face, bent her head. Her shoulders shook.

“I know, dear,” said Posie. All the books said that this was not the right thing to say but Posie thought that, in this instance, they were not necessarily correct.

“Oh, Posie!” said Sally, rubbing her eyes. “’I can’t bear it.”

A car honked and a rolled-up newspaper paper landed almost at their feet. Posie bent to pick it up. “I understand, dear. Time is not always a healer. We just manage as best we can.”

“Exactly,” said Sally. She tossed her hair back and swept a hand through it. “That is exactly what I say, Posie.”

The retriever bounded up and tried to wrest the newspaper from Posie. “No!”

She smacked him on the nose. He growled.

“Snuffles!” Sally waved the envelope at the dog. “Come here. Posie, I — ”

The sound of “The Carnival Is Over” rent the air and Sally fumbled in her pocket.

“Yes, what?” Sally put her hand over the phone. “Sorry Posie, it’s Brett.” She twisted away from Snuffles and from Posie, slapping the envelope against her hip.

“Yes, okay . . . yes!” She kicked the banksia. Snuffles growled. “Well, if you open
your eyes and look, darling, you’ll see.”

Had she written the right thing? Posie felt increasingly uncomfortable, listening in to a private call. She picked at the plastic wrap around the paper, pleased at the distracting sound as the newspaper unfurled. She flattened it against a nearby gum. They were easier to read this way.

Sally kicked the banksia again, harder this time. The recoil of her foot caught the retriever in the mouth. He whimpered. “Oh! I was already upset and now you’ve made me kick Snuffles.” Sally turned back toward Posie, exhaled. Posie saw the brilliant white flash of her teeth. No-one had had such white teeth when Posie was a girl.

“Well, if you were better organised you wouldn’t need to ring me.” Sally hung up. The retriever whined. She bent down to him, taking his face in her hands and stroked his nose and pulled his floppy ears. “Oh Snuffy, I didn’t mean to kick you. Here.” From her other pocket she pulled a dog biscuit.

“Thank you so much again, Posie. It will be lovely to see you on Saturday.” Then she was moving away, pushing the envelope into her back pocket.

Posie walked back across the grass, the labrador panting behind her. “Very good boy!” she said. “But you’re not coming inside.” She patted him on the nose as she edged in the door.

Minerva was drinking tea. She looked expectantly at Posie. “I thought I heard the paper-boy.”

“She didn’t mention Eleanora,” said Posie, handing Minerva the unrolled paper.

“Of course she didn’t mention Eleanora,” said Minerva, scanning the newspaper headlines.

“Perhaps,” said Posie. “I do not feel that there is any of course about it. With two such tragic events occurring so close together it is always difficult to think of one without the other.”

“It’s difficult for you, you mean,” said Minerva. “Not everyone connects things the way you do.” She pointed at the saucepan. “I turned it off,” she said. “Didn’t want it to burn.”

Posie poked at the porridge with the wooden spoon. “Just right,” she said, pouring the cereal into waiting bowls. “Nearly ten years,” she said, setting the two
plates of porridge on the white tablecloth, not looking at Minerva. “That’s how long it’s been.”

Minerva looked up from the newspaper. “This tea is exactly the right strength, thank you,” she said.

“Ten years since that poor little baby boy’s soul went to Heaven,” said Posie. A whine came from outside the closed door leading out to the garden. Both ladies ignored it.

“And nearly ten years since she just vanished, somewhere between lunch and tea-time,” said Posie, sitting down and grasping her porridge bowl tightly. “Ten years, and no word, no sign, nobody knows what happened.”

“Oh, somebody knows.” Minerva placed her teacup firmly in its saucer.

“Perhaps there was an accident. She was alone, and she couldn’t call for help.” Posie’s grip on her porridge bowl was fierce.

Minerva snorted. “Perhaps, and perhaps pigs are flying these days too.” She gulped some tea. “A person doesn’t vanish into thin air. Somebody knows.” The whine grew louder. “At least he’s not scraping the paint off.”

Posie let go of the bowl. “This is too hot,” she said. She pushed herself back slightly, and her chair creaked. “Oh my goodness.” She stood up, changed it for another. “We must get these chairs fixed.”

“It’s too early in the morning for that noise.” Minerva scraped her own chair back, and opened the door. The labrador catapulted inside, a gruesome black and white feather bundle in its jaws.

Posie spat out a mouthful of porridge and flapped her spoonless hand. “Oh how ghastly! He’s killed a magpie!”

The labrador deposited its muddy mouthful on the lino. The bird looked like it had been dipped in mud that had caked and dried; and then been dipped again. Posie burst into tears.

“I don’t think so,” said Minerva, looking intently at the dead bird. “He’s dug up the one I buried yesterday. The one I found dead on our front lawn.” She picked up the magpie and marched into the laundry, followed closely by the dog. Posie heard a flop, the tap running, the soap clattering in the dish. Presently Minerva returned, business-
like as usual even in her dressing gown. “You lie down and be quiet,” she said to the
dog, pointing at its rug.

She sat back at the table. “It’s in a bucket in the sink, out of his reach. I’ll bury
it later, while you’re out.” She spooned large amounts of brown sugar onto her porridge,
then tipped a bountiful amount of cream into both their bowls. “Eat up, Posie, it’ll be
getting cold. And you’ve got a train to catch.”

Obedient — when was she ever anything else? But then, when was there ever
any need to create unpleasantness, as her dear father used to say? — Posie sprinkled
sugar and sank her spoon into the oats. She even swallowed some before she said,
“Nearly ten years. Such a long time, yet it seems to have gone so fast.”

Minerva kept eating.

Posie set her spoon down. “And if I feel as I do, what about poor Robbie? How
must he feel? How has he gone on, all these years, alone.”

“Not alone. He’s had two children to raise. And all those animals.” Minerva
put her spoon in her bowl, finished her tea, poured another cup. “More tea?”

Posie waved away the offer. She sipped, then picked up her spoon again. Her
dressing gown sleeve slid into the porridge bowl. She looked pleadingly at Minerva.
“There is no understanding the wickedness of it.”

#

Robbie lay in bed thinking about cobwebs. He could see three on the ceiling
above him. Two of them were perfect lacy mazes, symmetrical traps for the unwary,
labyrinths unravelled from the source. The other was abandoned, broken, its intricacies
collapsed into a mess of sticky thread. Robbie knew how easily that could happen.
How your own individual pattern could turn out to be not simply asymmetrical, but shot
through by something unseen which came from nowhere and changed the shape
completely. Changed the weft and weave of a carefully spun yarn into a never-ending
unravelling.

The slushy irregular slap of sodden gum leaves at his window had woken him
before five. Then Raver, predictably, had joined in the kookaburra chorus, his mimicry
*bird-perfect*, as Ella used to say. Robbie had thought about getting up then, but he
planned to be late in this morning.

He had to plan extra-carefully at the moment. To wrest back any control of his days. Especially since he had lost control of his nights again. He was used to it now after all these years. The interminable cycle that he couldn’t keep track of. He accepted it. Even welcomed it sometimes, as a sign that the innermost part of him was still somehow connected to her. The time of year, a memory that a chance turn of phrase ignited; these reminders were things that were inside him, not things he clung to, against the advice, stated and unstated, of persons who had never known her. Not really known her. People who never had to feel the pain of missing Ella. He had gone through phases where he wanted to scream at all of them, all those fools and well-meaners who wouldn’t leave him alone. Scream out her words, it’s natural, it’s mourning sickness. But he kept quiet and stayed inside his head and worked long hours, made a go of things. More than a go; he knew the solace he found in his work was of a kind a thousand other jobs could not have given.

But now there was another reason to experience the sour rush of fear, a different sort of mourning sickness. And he was very much afraid that this story wouldn’t have a happy ending.

Resigned to what had to be done, he pushed himself out of bed. What an effort, perhaps he was coming down with something. He went to the ensuite, ran shaving water into the sink. Sleep crinkled in the corner of his eyes. Blurry morning vision and a moment’s missed attention; he cut himself. He glared at his reflection. Blood dripped. He sloshed water at it. He felt the trickle on his throat and imagined it a gush of red. He saw himself pale in the mirror. Saw Ella beside him. Splashing water at his neck, stumbling to sit on the bed, he pressed the towel to his chin. All the while aware of a familiar incantation in the background: “You’ll be late, for an important date; you’ll be late, you’ll be late for an important date.”

He inspected the stain on the towel. Oh, Robbie! It’s a squidgy cut! Melodrama! He lay back on the bed, relieved. Not a throat-slasher hospital-visit cut, then. Just a normal everyday one.

“You’ll be late.”

He wished for the umpteenth time that Ella had chosen a different phrase to teach
the bird to say first thing in the morning. For someone who usually was running late, it was hardly calming to hear about it. With such a bad time of year so fast approaching, perhaps it would be wise to send Raver on a holiday to Posie’s. None of the anniversaries, all the days that should have, would have, been celebrations were she still with them, were ever good. But this was the worst because it never would have been an anniversary at all.

He pushed himself off the bed and scraped open the door onto the verandah, sticking his head out. The chanting stopped abruptly. A pink and grey bird observed him quizzically from its cage. “Good morning,” said Robbie, poking out his tongue and withdrawing into the room again, ignoring the screech of outrage that followed him. He cleaned himself up and struggled into his clothes. The pale blue shirt and red tie, the faded dark grey suit that made him into a grey man who could easily blend in, could masquerade as a serious, important person who got things done. A man who belonged in the Museum.

All the while, the parrot chortled on about being late and some other phrases, too, speaking so fast in its morning excitement that it was difficult to understand what it was saying. Where were his shoes? “Not on the floor, that’s for sure,” said Robbie aloud, deliberately speaking in parrot-poetry. At the sound of his voice the parrot screeched again, and he saw it bobbing frantically up and down through the window. “Pieces of eight! It’s a pleasure, treasure!”

Dressed except for his shoes, Robbie leant out the French door and pulled the cage door open for the excited bird. With Raver perched on his shoulder he went upstairs, tripping over Lily’s sneakers on the stairs. The silence in the house and the evidence in the kitchen — a lone chipped bowl of soggy cornflake scraps — showed him that Hugh was still asleep and Lily gone. He popped his toast and spread it, wrapped it in paper towel to eat in the car. Man could almost live on bread alone, Robbie had done a pretty good job of it over the years. He peeled off a buttery corner for the parrot, whose eyes glittered with pleasure as it nibbled. “Great, mate,” it said. He cut off a quarter of a banana for the bird as well and boiled the kettle to make tea for the thermos to keep him going on the drive into the city.

“Where’s Ella, fella?” Finished with the toast, the bird clicked and jumped its
way over to the kitchen windowsill and sat staring out. For months, hearing this had been an open wound for Robbie, but when, unable to bear it any more, he parted with the bird, gave him to Posie to mind, he couldn’t bear that either. Ella had had him practically from a baby. It felt wrong to abandon him. And after the initial kerfuffle with Posie, who had become devoted to Raver and was looking for any trace or touch of Ella that she could keep close and nurture, Raver came back home, on the understanding that he make regular visits to Aunty’s place.

Where on earth were his shoes? Robbie combed his hair with his fingers, thinking, eliminating the possibilities. The kettle and Raver started whistling in unison and Robbie remembered where he’d left them. Poured the tea, took the bird back downstairs and put him into his cage, along with the rest of the banana and some spinach leaves. His shoes were in his favourite room, the room that he still shared with Ella. His shoes were in the study.

Opening the study door, Robbie felt a sense of calm envelop him. Books jostled each other on the shelves and tumbled in uneven piles across the well-worn rugs. The slightly sagging lounges hosted a variety of clothing. The cat was there, was sleeping on his newest old jumper, from under which there poked some crumpled sheets of paper. Congratulations, Robbie, for buying basic black, no visible fur lines. His shoes were under the lounge. He shoved his feet in, pleased the double knots in the laces were holding so well. A bottle of wine stood invitingly open on the carpet. Only an inch left in it. The almost-empty bottle showed him last night had been just as bad as he remembered. And clearly he hadn’t been in a state to remember much or he would never have left his notes under his jumper or left the study door open. Unlocked, at any rate. Robbie knew the cat could open it, he had seen it with his very own uninebriated eyes in the past. Up on its hind legs it would stand and paw at the handle till it turned. Robbie disliked the cat in his study, there was too much for any cat to be curious about and Mr Happy was a cat of insatiable curiosity, O Best Beloved! Robbie lifted the cat onto his shoulder, bracing for the claws and the thunderous purr. He was relieved to see the sheets of paper were crinkled but not torn. Flicking through them, he recognised the handwritten precis of his lecture notes for Saturday, complete with a suitably sinister caricature of a cane toad … with a crown on its head. Robbie wasn’t sure he liked
seeing evidence of the way his mind had been working. He must have been really far gone. Crumpling the pages further, he shoved them in his pocket and hoisted the cat more firmly into place, the jumper over the other shoulder. He took Mr Happy down the hall and put him on Lily’s bed, then went back to his study, fishing in his pocket for the key.

“So long-o, drongo, favour Raver,” called Raver, hearing the key turn in the study door.

“Sorry, I’d rather be here at home with you,” said Robbie, pulling on the jumper and blowing cat fur out of his mouth. “But why don’t you have a little change of scenery.” He left the parrot in the alcove opposite Hugh’s bedroom door. Robbie was pretty sure Hugh had some type of lecture or studio or something today. No chance of sleeping through “Whoo! Look at you, Hugh!” which was what Raver would say in increasingly strident tones until Hugh opened the door. Ella had trained him well. And ten years of repetition had probably helped a bit. Even if Hugh pulled the blankets over his head, Riki Tiki was in there too, most likely sleeping (unacceptably, but Robbie had given up on that years back) on the bed. The dog had a pathological hatred of being behind a closed door with a parrot talking on the other side; well, who could blame him? Riki Tiki would whine and bark and no-one could sleep through that, not even Hugh.

Before Robbie left, he brought the sizeable cardboard box into the house. He felt exposed, moving it from the station wagon to his study in daylight, but it had really been too wet to move it last night. And he didn’t want to leave it in the car all day at work. Not only could that be damaging, it could be extremely foolish in the current political climate.

He drove into the city on auto-pilot, seeing the squat ugliness of cane toads superimposed onto the mass of traffic that was before his eyes. That was the point he needed to make, that they were everywhere now, taking over; cane toad on the main road, on the superhighway to extinction. How to quash the invasion, that was what he wanted people to focus on, squashing the slimy bastards. The road was still slick with recent rain and Robbie, fully and dangerously in the zone, had the impression that he was part of some motorised ballet where cars seemed to be gliding and sliding according to a preconceived pattern rather than braking and accelerating in the usual random
fashion. An incident of road rage, possibly caused by his own inattention, slapped him out of that zone pretty fast. Slow down, Robbie. Ignore that woman. She’s probably screaming at someone else; anyway, don’t pay her any attention and she’ll get tired of it. Robbie was always happy to hear Ella calm him down; it was comforting, it was what Ella did. Just look out the other window, Robbie, maybe turn the radio up. You know, it’s probably not a good idea to think about squashing toads while you’re driving. What’s on the news? He listened to her, turned up the radio. But his thoughts kept returning to cane toads and then moved, more happily, onto frogs. He and Ella both liked frogs. Especially the ones that turned into princes. Happy ever after, forever and ever.

After about forty-five minutes Robbie found himself corralled by traffic at Hyde Park. Bumper to bumper traffic. Inching along he saw the bloke in the top hat and black cape was in the park again. A tourist attraction? You never knew what public money might be spent on. Knowing what some of it wasn’t spent on was easy, he had daily reminders of some very urgent … matters … that were missing out. He’d heard that some money was going on papier-mâché dragons for Chinese New Year; let them all eat monsoon cake! Maybe just a rumour, a Chinese whisper, ha ha. Still, the thought of Chinatown, of heading over there for a quick recce during the festival, was appealing. He’d heard the spectacle was worth a look. The public found dragons in general to be marvellously scary. Dragons were full of life, they were supposed to be lucky according to cultures of the East, they were certainly fantastic and even in nature they stood out. They had a certain zingity-zang to them that an animal like a cane toad lacked. Chameleons, bearded, good old man-eating (if they could get a man) komodos. They were living legends, the tyrannosaurus of lizards. What about frilled dragons? Now, that was an idea for his speech. The speech that he needed to work on this morning. Get those toads squashed into shape good and proper. Straight after his usual morning ritual and his usual morning walk across Hyde Park to find his morning coffee.

He waited for the lights to change again; and then again, and then he was there, he was parking, and now he had become Dr Ravell in his grey suit and blue shirt and red tie and he was going to finish a speech about cane toads, just as soon as he had had his coffee, a speech which he would make at the exhibition opening tomorrow.
CHAPTER THREE
A Lost Boy Hopeful Seeking

As usual, Peter set up just off the avenue of ninety-nine figs, on the grass between the Captain Cook statue and the rotunda. College, Elizabeth and Park Streets were all in his sights. The fig trees provided excellent shelter from the light showers that seemed to be more and more a feature of city weather as the summer went on.

It was ten years since he’d been to Sydney. Ten years since he and Margaret had taken their big trip. Years before she married that tosser. The constant rain was surprising, and somewhat annoying, but not as annoying as the number of dirty black and white ibis who seemed to consider that Hyde Park was theirs and humans the intruder. He’d seen little tags around some of their legs, bracelets of different colours. Maybe they were City of Sydney ibis, specially protected or something. That was possible, although they didn’t behave like they needed protecting.

Waiting for Mr Mad Scientist to amble by was boring. There were only so many rabbits a man could pull out of a hat, especially considering the weather and general lack of audience. He tried a few tricks for some whingy kids in a stroller but they weren’t having any. Started crying and pointing. ‘We thought it would be a live rabbit,’ said the mother. ‘Like we saw on stage at Westfield. Proper magic. Come on, boys.’ They all glared at Peter as they walked past toward the Museum. Spoilt brats.

Delving into the pocket of the flimsy cloak, Peter checked his phone. Still no messages. He went back to watching the Museum. Impressive on the outside. A quirky touch, that dinosaur tail coming out of the second floor. But rooms and rooms full of skeletons and dead bodies. Peter wouldn’t like working there. He needed the living, and to be out and about. To feel life all around him. He’d been inside the Museum when he first arrived in Sydney, just to suss it out. To see what images and impressions he might be able to appropriate, to transform into a story he could deliver to a demanding public when the time came. He wanted, needed, the Museum to give his story popular appeal, to make him a person worth listening to. He owed it to Margaret. He’d vowed to fight
to see that justice was done and that was what he’d do. But he needed something bigger than himself to help. The Museum was going to be his lucky break. It would give him authenticity.

The rain increased in tempo. He crushed his top hat and shoved it into the voluminous pocket, taking out a banana. Noticed a few of the ibis moving toward him as he peeled it. Time to get moving. He couldn’t wait all day for a man who might or might not appear. Maybe Mr Mad Scientist was having a day off, who knew. He ripped the cape over his head and scrunched it into his backpack, pulling up the hood of his jacket. That would keep him halfway dry. An umbrella might come in handy when he popped along to Chinatown to see the dragon dance tonight. He was looking forward to seeing that policewoman again, to meeting her friends. How lucky had that been? Chatting up a girl he liked the look of, and her turning out to be just what he wanted. So many things came down to chance. Seeing — imagining? — a slight lull in the rain, Peter set off at a jog for the Starbucks on the corner of Park and Elizabeth.
CHAPTER FOUR
A Lucky Dragon Peeking

Dragons had always been part of Clementine’s life. Her mother had impressed on her how carefully she had planned, to make certain that her daughter was born in the Year of the Dragon. How she had waited. Lied to Clementine’s father about contraception when he expressed his longing for a child to prove their union to the world. She had wanted her child to have a life filled with good luck, and of all the signs, Dragons were the luckiest ones. The ones most able to choose their destiny, to affect their fate. When, in the tropical stupor of Clementine’s pre-school Port Moresby days, a Papuan Black snake struck past Clementine to embed its fangs in the plump little leg of her three-year-old playmate, Clementine’s mother said she had been spared because she was born in Year of the Dragon. When Clementine learnt to read before all the other children, Clementine’s mother said it was because she was a dragon. When, just before she’d left Papua New Guinea, a car accident claimed Clementine’s schoolfriend along with the schoolfriend’s father while Clementine escaped — with a greenstick fracture, severe bruising and shock — Clementine’s mother had assured her daughter that she was never in any real danger; she was a dragon, she had a destiny to fulfill.

Clementine did not know what her mother thought of her most recent escape and did not intend to find out. Some things were not meant to be told to mothers. But it was not so easy to stop thinking about dragons, to dismiss a half-belief that had been with her since childhood, to resist the lure of its certainty. When she’d first walked off the plane at Darwin airport all those years ago, the frill-necked dragon in the car-park had made her think of her mother and made her feel she’d come home. Darwin was another hot sticky colour-filled place in the world where creatures appeared to ignore the encroachments of humans. Off to that start no wonder she’d settled so easily into Territory life, joined the police to make a contribution, fallen in love, succumbed to marriage, to the lure of the Centre and then to Coober Pedy. She’d never thought she’d ever want to leave.

But here she was in Sydney, maybe never to return. Only a few hours away by
air but it was another world here. No dragons in the airport car park this time. She
forked out for an umbrella straight away. After filling out a form for her luggage to be
delivered when (if?) it turned up, she caught the airport train to Central. She could walk
from here.

In the railway carpark, the sky was grey, the traffic noise was incredible and the
drizzle was more on than off. Clementine breathed deeply, relishing the heavy thickness
of the air, the cacophony of traffic, the overcast sky. This was her kind of place right
now. Snapping her umbrella open, she turned right and headed toward Pitt Street, in the
direction of the Quay.

Waiting at the lights at the bottom of Railway Square, she looked left up the light
rail track on Hay Street, and it was then she saw the dragon, curving across Capitol
Square on its way up Sussex or Dixon Street. Chinese New Year! There was plenty of
time for a detour; why not? The plane had arrived early and Benita would be busy with
police business for some time yet. How could she ignore such a propitious sign?
Changing direction, Clementine ran to catch the dragon.

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‘Who can ever say where the end of anything starts? People always look for clues in
history but those clues aren’t necessarily there to be found. Or if they are their meaning
isn’t what you might think. There’s always, in my experience, lot of hiding going on, a
lot of randomness, a lot of luck, good and bad depending on your point of view. Until
you decide to take control of your own destiny. Which can mean making some tough
decisions, in my experience. Some things, or somebody, often has to go.

I have decided to write this all down, so I’m in control. Sometimes lately I’m so angry
that I’m afraid I’m going to let something out at the wrong moment. So I’m going to
discipline myself to organize my thoughts. Get it out of me, out into the universe,
making sense of it in black and white. Not let any funny feelings get the better of me. I’m
done with all that now. No more reacting to the moment and relying on the universe for
solutions. Even if they might be particularly appropriate ones! No more panicking and making do with whatever’s available. No more complicated killing, of anything. Hands free, that’s the way of my future. Fail to plan – plan to fail. It’s become my mantra. It’s been a long time . . . all the waiting, and organizing it all …but it’s nearly time now and I’m sticking to my plan. Fingers crossed nothing unexpected happens.’
CHAPTER FIVE
Animals Beguiling

Robbie went in the side door on Park Street. As per his usual habit, he planned a quick peek into one of the Spirit Rooms before his working day began. He liked to be a man of regular habit. Many days, it was all that kept him going.

All the Spirit Rooms were spooky, rooms crammed full of the dead and their belongings. Logically ordered, beautifully labeled; too little too late too many times. Sometimes Robbie was overwhelmed by sadness, thinking of all the beautiful dead creatures, feeling powerless to prevent the slaughter of species. The occupants of the Spirit Rooms were always waiting for him to remind him that the past was ever, immutably, present.

Surprisingly, the Spirit Room was this morning occupied by more than just the dead. It was packed full of living bodies, quite a sizeable gathering that he could see through the shelves to the back of the room. Robbie backed out the door just as somebody called “Hey?” Galvanised into action! It would never do for anyone to connect Dr Ravell with an unscheduled visit to the Spirit Room. He sprinted down the corridor, up the back stairs, no hoi polloi allowed off leash on those back stairs, very glad that he could run still when he had to. In his office, he turned on the computer and sent an email to establish that he was at his desk. Then down the stairs again and through the corridors that took him past the mainly empty offices of his colleagues. Out the front door, in search of coffee.

As usual he crossed College Street at the front of the Museum rather than at the lights, stepping up through the rotunda and onto the grass, squishy with moisture this morning. With thoughts of the Spirit Room clattering in his head he barely noticed it was drizzling. His glasses slicked with water and carried him further into his emotional fugue. Until he bumped, hard, up against another person.

“Sorry,” said Robbie.

“Me too,” said Peter, pulling the drawstring on his hoodie tighter round his face. He hesitated. Should he? No, now wasn’t the time.
Robbie forgot about Peter as soon as he apologized. He could already hear Ella. *Robbie! Keep your eyes open, you’re like a parody of a mad professor!* He pulled his suit jacket up over his head in a dismal attempt to shelter from the rain. Now he could see it was too wet to go for coffee. Besides which, he really did need his other morning fix. He turned back.

Soon he was standing, tentatively, dripping a little, outside the Spirit Room door. He would say he was looking for Brett, if there was anyone in. A lie, (he would never be looking for Brett), but a believable one.

No answer. Slipping in, Robbie breathed in the comforting smell of napthalene and waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The stillness and silence calmed him, prepared him for the coming. He took a few minutes to gaze on his favourites and then he was back in his office. Centred for the day.

He had just taken the notes for his cane toad lecture from his pocket when his phone rang.

Greg from the front desk phrased things with his usual flair. “Two police people, Senior Constable Paterson and Sergeant Gallagher, come to see about the secrets of the Spirit House.” Even in the middle of his shock, Robbie appreciated the fittingness of such a description. There was something unsurprising about a Spirit House having secrets, after all. “They were booked to see Dr Waterford, but he’s on emergency leave. They want to know if there’s anyone else they can speak to.”

Providence? Fate? “I’ll come down, just ask them to wait with you, please, Greg,” and Robbie hung up the phone before it slipped out of his hand.

Then he held his hands out in front of him. Hands were ever a measure of his state of mind. He saw the fluttering, put them under his thighs and pushed down with his body weight. He needed to look like he was in control.

He’d been waiting a long time for this call, hoping it would never come. But knowing, deep inside, that it would. That something would happen. That was the nature of life after all, and who should know that better than he, steeped in the lore of natural science, the science of life, since his earliest years.

He rocked back and forth in his chair. Leaned back as far as he dared, craning his neck to seek comfort in the sliver of tended nature he could see from his window.
But rain lashed the narrow panes of glass, sliced his view of palm treetops and other greenery into impressionistic blurs.

He looked at the poster on the office wall. At least if you knew what was coming you could prepare. Those toads had gotten away, started hopping and kept on going. Now they were nearly clear across the continent. That could be read as a cautionary tale. Maybe too late for him now, though.

He pulled open his desk drawer, and looked for a few seconds at the photo he kept hidden from the workaday world. “A thing of beauty is a joy forever. Evermore.” Hearing her say it, seeing her clasp his hands and hold them firmly, still their fluttering completely. Closing the drawer, he straightened the photos on his desk and made himself breathe deeply. He closed his eyes so he could choose what to see. You are in control, Robbie. And what do you think he saw? Why, he saw a beautiful princess, waiting in a tower. Robbie opened his eyes.

He stared at the poster again.

Walking down the wide marble staircases, Robbie saw beneath the practical treads installed to manage possible slips. Underneath the rubber, he felt their surfaces shimmering with the transformative energy of stories from the past. Surrounding and enclosing all the shabby marks of public feet and public purses, he saw the collections that were not displayed, heard their clamouring in the bowels and side-alleys of the institution. He felt a gathering of what Ella had called his storybook confidence, a hula-hoop halo of invisible protection; a confidence that gained in strength from his first glimpse of The Police, waiting patiently beside the ground-floor desk. They looked young (surely that policewoman must still be on probation?) and uncomfortable. Robbie thought that their enforced waiting time had given him unintended advantage. Their inexperience could mean that the building, the promise of what the building contained, despite or maybe because of its shabbiness and air of truthful work, would begin to impose itself on them. Even here in the foyer, the most public place in this public institution, the energy of the collected and collated past could be persuasive.

“I was saying you’re very lucky to catch Dr Ravell, he’s a busy, busy man and usually you’d have to ring for an appointment.” Greg was using his official voice. The young policeman (a hefty, well-built specimen, with shiny pink face and unpleasant
body odour) stepped forward, taking charge of introductions.

“Dr Ravell? Good morning, thanks for making time to meet with us. I’m Detective Sergeant Gallagher, this is Senior Constable Paterson.”

“Please, call me Robbie. Let’s go up to my office. We’ll be more comfortable there.” Robbie felt his confidence ring settling, a firm, shiny circle encasing his head. He led the way up the shimmering stairway watching them tread extra carefully on the smooth unevenness of marble. He saw the young policewoman look around with interest as she climbed, but the Sergeant plodded onward and upward without a sideways glance. A man with a (narrow) focus on the job at hand. Robbie did not think that the Sergeant would be a man of understanding. Or a man who understood. Past the dinosaur hall, through the long narrow hall of endangered species. Past the living-danger table, avoiding a column of children. They all jumped when a child slapped the table and the teeth of a great white shark arked up at them.

In his makeshift office, Robbie stood back and nodded toward the uncomfortable visitors’ chairs. “Have a seat, won’t you.” Paterson settled firmly in the nearest, least-uncomfortable looking chair, which meant that Gallagher had to squeeze his slightly porky (a policeman who actually resembles a pig, how delicious) body past her to fold himself into the other. Robbie saw her look around at the posters, saw the smile she quickly stopped. Gallagher looked only at Robbie.

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Robbie sat on the other side of the desk. He was pleased he could put the desk between them and pleased that he could hide his good old giveaway hands under it. They were definitely best hidden.

“Thanks for making the time to see us so promptly, Mr, er, Dr Ravell.” Gallagher cleared his throat. Robbie noticed that his policeman fingers twitched, pinching pieces of air. And a foot tapped, too. Maybe they could find some common ground.

“My pleasure,” said Robbie, trying to look as though it were true. He kept his hand firmly on his knees and out of sight.
“As you know, we’re here about the missing specimens from the Spirit House. So first up, I’d like to clarify exactly how many specimens are missing.”

“Well, we’re not exactly sure,” said Robbie, stretching his legs. Actually, he had a pretty good idea, but he was confident that nobody else did. So it wasn’t a lie. Which was good. It might make things easier if he told as few lies as possible. He didn’t think he was a particularly good liar. “Probably not too many.”

“Right,” said Gallagher. Constable Paterson concentrated on writing in her notebook.

Gallagher leaned forward, elbows on knees, head nodding. Robbie thought the pace of the finger-pinching had increased. “Who’s responsible for cataloguing, checking, doing stock-takes, that sort of thing?”

Robbie leaned back, careful to keep his hands under the desk. Careful to make eye contact. “Well … we sort of share responsibility. Whoever has time or energy, resources. There isn’t really any systematic way of doing it. It just happens as needs must.” Adding, “And not always then.”

Gallagher pulled his chin in and shifted on his chair. He actually raised his eyebrows. Here is an animal that knows how to communicate surprise. Robbie tried to keep his own face suitably blank. Paterson looked up from her notebook and smiled at Robbie. It felt like a smile of encouragement, to let Robbie know he was doing well.

Relax, Robbie, look relaxed. When you get that look on your face I don’t know what you’re thinking. Thank you, Ella. But what could he say to them, to make them go away. To make them go away and not come back. Robbie leaned back further and clasped his hands behind his head, locked fingers each to each. “I suppose it does sound unlikely, in this era of full computerisation, but what one needs to understand and remember, Detective Sergeant, is that the Museum is an old institution. We date from 1827, and there wasn’t really a plan in the beginning. People have simply taken charge of things as needed, over the years. That’s just the way it’s always worked. Resources, you see — I’m sure you understand that?” One man of the world to another, that’s it Robbie.

Gallagher nodded. Robbie noticed the fingers had slowed down. He locked his own together even more tightly. “There’ll never be enough money to fund all the things
that need doing here, so the things that people volunteer to do are the things that get
done.” Robbie paused. Did he need to say anymore? They still looked skeptical, as
though they were waiting for another answer.

Robbie leant forward and put his hands on the desk, holding one down firmly
with the other. “For instance, I’ve made it a large part of my role over the years to be
heavily involved in exhibits and exhibitions on rarity and extinction.”

As if directed, Gallagher and Paterson both turned to look at the posters on the
wall.

“Cane toads,” said Gallagher. “Thought they were everywhere. Prolific, is the
word that comes to my mind. Not extinction.”

“Toad of Toad Mall?” said Paterson, looking at the poster of a giant toad
squatting malevolently at the entrance to a shopping centre, complete with handbag. “I
think I’ve heard that somewhere before.”

Robbie steepled his fingers. “Ah, you may be thinking of your childhood,
Detective. If you had an English childhood. Culturally speaking. A.A. Milne’s play,
Toad of Toad Hall. Inspired by Wind in the Willows, of course. The idea is that the
shopping toad is such a bizarre image, it makes you think.”

He walked over to the posters. His hands felt solid, reliable, unwavering. They
would not betray him. Gallagher flexed meaty fists and Robbie thought that Paterson
looked repelled.

“The central idea of the exhibition is that the cane toad is the ultimate destructive
consumer; the shops in Toad Mall are filled with animals that the toad finds a tasty treat.
Ta da!” Robbie made a deliberate flourish. You can do this. “As you follow the toad
through the exhibition, you can see how the landscape changes as the toad makes its way
down the road and takes over the environment.” He pointed to the other posters. Toad
on the Road. Toad and the Whole. He was quite proud of the storyline for the
exhibition. “It opens tomorrow. I still have to write my speech.”

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Gallagher cleared his throat. “Getting back to these missing animal exhibits, Dr
Ravell. Why would someone take these items?"

_A very good question, Sergeant._ Robbie flopped back behind his desk. He put his hands back underneath. He shrugged. Hugh’s comments came back to him. “I believe there’s a very lucrative black-market trade. A lot of it’s done over the internet these days, of course.”

“You can sell a stuffed lion on the internet?” Robbie was pretty certain that the skepticism was deliberate, a pretence to a lack of knowledge, calculated to elicit a response.

“I think you can sell anything on eBay, can’t you, Detective?” said Robbie. “That’s what I understand from my son, anyway. But I’m afraid I’m a bit of a dinosaur about that sort of thing.” _A dinosaur in a museum, oh very funny, Robbie. Next you’ll be talking about skeletons in the closet. Do not go there._ He heard her warning louder and clearer than anything else that had been said.

Time for them to leave. He smiled, a practised paste-on, while he focused on the photo on his desk. A photo of the Lesser Stick Nest Rat. This was what he needed his energy for. To stop extinctions. To stop the vanishing. To stop the predators. To find the reasons. To write the stories. The rat was a recent extinction, possibly last seen in 1970. Not so very long ago. He heard, like static on the radio, interference to his thinking.

“… so-called Spirit House, I assume it refers to the fact that specimens are preserved in alcohol?”

“I assume so,” said Robbie politely. He stared at the photo of the rat. Gallagher shifted his bulk to see the picture and recoiled slightly. Robbie was rather pleased to see this. He saw the shape of the police report emerging. Lots of ifs and buts and maybes. Not because the police wouldn’t ask the right questions but because Robbie never gave them clear answers. The answers that they wanted and they needed to make a logical report. The answers they needed to be satisfied.

“So — you’re not sure how many exhibits are missing?” It seemed Gallagher didn’t believe him. Robbie appreciated the reasonableness of police thinking; how could an institution be run like that?

“If the police were unable to account for exhibits, there would be a right
palaver.” Gallagher was leaning back again now.

Robbie nodded slowly, thoughtfully. “I’m sure there would. Your exhibits are needed, I imagine for court matters.” He refocused on the rat. The last sighting had been in a Western Australian cave. Was it so unfeasible to imagine that perhaps, in some dark crevice still unpoked by human hands, there were other Lesser Stick Nest Rats still living? That an absence somewhere was a presence somewhere else? Caves could be sanctuaries.

“Dr Ravell?”

“I can make some inquiries, perhaps have a quick look to make a guesstimate myself, but I can’t give you the answer you want now,” said Robbie, careful to sound earnest, to show no impatience. He kept his eyes on the rat. I see you, Ratty!

Paterson shifted so she could see the photo. “A rat,” she said. “Is it part of your research?”

Robbie smiled. OUR special project, Best Beloved! “A reminder of what’s important,” he said. “Is there anything else? I really do need to get on with my speech for tomorrow.”
CHAPTER SIX
Fancy Upon Fancy

“You’ve got everything?” That was all Minnie said, but Posie knew what she was really asking. Posie smiled, patted her handbag. “Of course, Minnie, don’t worry about me. Have a lovely day.” Posie smiled and waved as Minnie headed the Morris back toward home. Then she walked up the ramp to the ticket box and brought a ticket from the nice young man and waited to catch the lift down to the platform. She could still manage stairs, but her knees didn’t like them. The lift doors swished open and she stepped out onto the platform and here she was, Posie Greene, part of the world of the city commuter. All the shiny hair and sober suits; the elegant high shoes, well-polished brogues; the coffees held like talismans against the evils of the day. Although this next train would run outside the main peak hour, many of the travellers were obviously going to work. Posie appreciated all the swishing and swashing; it provided a delicious backdrop to the storybook world she would be immersed in on the train.

Posie loved reading. From when she was a girl she had read and read and read whenever she could. Her father had had a big library, all the classics, of course, as well as many racy (for the times) modern novels. Posie had devoured them, and kept feasting as an adult. She felt sorry for those who didn’t read; although she didn’t know too many people like that herself, she had heard that less and less reading (of novels, anyway) was happening these days. But not to any of her nearest and dearest. Minnie and Eleanor and Robbie and Lily, even Hugh, they were all readers, they all loved a good story.

Posie looked forward to the train trip to and from the city every week. From the time she settled into her seat on the 8.30 (though it was often late, she never was) to the time she got off at Town Hall, she was in another world. A world where everyone lived happily ever after, or at least lived to fight another day, following a gripping series of adventures that demanded complete suspension of disbelief. And these were the sorts of worlds that Posie liked best. Ones with quests, with real heroes and heroines and suspense; thrillers and mysteries, bodice-ripping romances. Posie checked her gloves were in her handbag (unnecessary, it was February and the temperature wouldn’t drop
below thirty this week), adjusted her blue gingham-check hat, (it went so well with the
blue skirt she was wearing, sweet, but an old one now, she remembered shopping for it
with Eleanora. How they had both loved the featured pockets, deep and impossible for
anything to fall out of!) and locked her mobile phone so that she didn’t accidentally dial
anyone’s number. She had done that quite a few times, fortunately only to Robbie and
Minnie and Hugh; but still. Posie treasured her mobile, she loved knowing she could
call any of her loved ones anywhere, anytime, revelled in the knowledge that never
again would she need to sit, anxious in the ill-lit hallway, waiting by the phone, in case
of a call that never came.

The train ambled in at 8.35, almost not late at all, thought Posie, but a crush
quickly formed near the doors. Posie stood back, she was quite confident that some nice
besuited man, or even a woman, seeing her cling tightly to the pole, would stand to give
her a seat, if necessary. But there was no need for sacrifice; the commuters hustled up
and down stairs and Posie was easily able to seat herself in the ground-level section of
the carriage.

Gloves accounted for, phone in the little side pocket, she allowed her hand to
steal right to the bottom of the bag, under the blue and white jumper, under the paper
bag with her vegemite sandwich and apple and homemade biscuits. She stroked the
smooth clean hardness of the gun, feeling fierce and proud as a lion, knowing she could
make a show (and probably more than just a show) of self-defence if she had to. Posie
had kept the gun in her handbag for years now, its twin nestled under what her mother
had called her unmentionables in the top drawer of her dressing table. She regularly
cleaned the pistols, and in the past decade she had taken up shooting again. Not too
often (it would have been difficult to get away to the range without anyone knowing, too
often; Minnie, of course, knew, but Minnie did not count), just often enough to reassure
herself that she could still manage if she had to. Keeping your hand in was what
counted. Other friends played bowls or bridge; or bushwalked. Posie was all for these
things, especially the bushwalking which she did do a little of, though rather less these
days; but after Eleanora disappeared, she had made a conscious decision to keep her old
skills well practised. She was going to be prepared, in case there was a next time. A
next time, where she could save the day by calling out, in bold strong voice, ‘hi ho!
Posie to the rescue!

Rituals attended to, Posie opened her novel: “The Woman In White.” It was one of her favourites and quite some years since she had read it last. It was a particular pleasure of Posie’s to re-read books whose treasures she had known first in the days when her parents were among the living. But she almost equally enjoyed modern novels, especially if one could meet the authors, have a signed copy. Minerva always scoffed and pointed out how the paper was cheap and would age quickly, what was the point of having a signed something when it would only fox and ruin and anyway, did they really need to buy more books when the library was so convenient? The house was so cluttered already with books, amongst other things. Posie didn’t care, she liked clutter and books, they made her feel at home. As to the foxing, she was ageing quickly too, quicker and quicker, it seemed, and she was pretty sure the paper would last as long as she would. She agreed to Minerva sorting through their books, giving some of them to St Vincent de Paul’s, but she kept her signed author copies, including Sally’s thriller (how exciting, to actually have an author living down the street! Even if Sally didn’t write any more) in the spare room, out of Minerva’s sight, she didn’t swap them or give them away. That was one thing she really missed now Grace was gone, even though it had been so many years, nearly ten now. Grace had enjoyed mysteries as much as Posie, and had always been happy to have a little chat about them. It had been terrible, how she had died so suddenly. But there was no sense dwelling on that now. Minnie didn’t care for mysteries. Not at all.

Before settling into her book, Posie surveyed her fellow passengers. Train travel was so full of possibilities, you never knew who you might sit next to. Once, Posie had recognized a well-known journalist. She had heard a woman with three small children reveal all to a friend about her husband and his friends, who were all sporting stars, names so well-known that that even Posie recognised them. Another time, she had listened, enthralled, to a one-sided mobile conversation where a young woman (having a conversation that in Posie’s day would have only been had in the strictest privacy, if at all) complained about her boyfriend’s lack; in several departments, it seemed, but most particularly in an essential one. Posie thought how fortunate young women were to be able to discuss such things so boldly these days (though it didn’t seem as though the
friend could suggest a solution). Even Minerva, who had felt the conventional constraints of Posie’s contemporaries rather less than most, would never have opened up such a dialogue.

Today, though, there weren’t any young women talking on phones, only one very young woman (possibly still a teenager) apparently asleep in a corner, her iPod securely attached to her ears. Posie approved of the smart business suit, the blue blouse scooping across her bosom, the fashionably short but not too short skirt, the shiny tights, mid-heel court shoes. Posie liked to think that if she were young now, she might well dress with such demure style. Though of course, she might prefer a trouser suit for work. More practical. This was her last thought before she became engrossed in “The Woman In White.”

The train stopped for ages at Epping, idled for so long that Posie was distracted from her reading. Epping was the first stop underground, where the train would go for a good quarter of an hour, maybe more. Posie particularly enjoyed the underground part of the trip. For a brief moment she could imagine she was in a foreign country. There had not been any underground in the suburbs where she was a girl; then, ‘The Underground’ had meant London or possibly even Paris, the very idea of it heralding adventure.

Just when Posie had decided that there had definitely been a railway incident, and was wondering when an announcement might be made (she hoped she wouldn’t have to change trains), the disembodied railway voice barked “doors closing” as three scruffy, young-ish men staggered onto the train, clutching brown paper bags. The brown paper bags were clinking. Posie didn’t need to see any bottles to guess what was inside them. The men were guffawing and sniggering, lurching and burping. They were also unshaven and smelt distinctly unwashed, as Posie’s mother would so delicately have put it. At ten am in the morning! They looked like they were closely related to each other, and reminded Posie of someone she had seen on the television, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on who. She tried to relax, to will the memory back into view. She didn’t like to go back to her book, she felt it her duty, somehow, to remain alert.

For a few minutes the men gulped and slurped, wiping dirty hands across
straggly facial hair. The hair on their heads hung stringily to their shoulders. They sat sideways, put their feet up on the seats, ignoring all the signs that told you not to do this. They made a number of comments to each other, all of them exceptionally crude and not funny at all, in Posie’s opinion. One of them pulled out a Swiss penknife (a blade! thought Posie) and took his grubby sandshoes off and started hacking at grimy yellowed toenails. The smell was revolting.

Then things got worse. At the same time as Posie remembered where she had seen the villains before, she heard one of them say to the other, “Wouldn’t mind seeing more of those legs,” complete with a nudge, nudge, wink, wink. They were looking openly at the sleeping young girl. Posie felt doubly blessed; blessed once by her excellent hearing, still remarkably sharp; and blessed again by the imminent arrival of the train at Chatswood, an open-air interchange, where there were sure to be lots of other trains and people. It was obvious that The Brothers (as she called them in her mind) were settling in for the journey to the city, so Posie decided it was time to settle out. As the train pulled into Chatswood, Posie moved along the bench seat and nudged the sleeping young woman, speaking directly into her ear, loudly. “Could you help me, dear, I am afraid I will need your assistance disembarking.” Was disembarking was the correct term to use? One boarded a train, and one boarded a ship; Posie was slightly doubtful, but it felt like the right thing to say.

Fortunately, the young woman was a courteous kind of old-fashioned girl, only too willing to help Posie, who whispered, clutching tight to the girl’s arm over the roar of the announcement of the station, “Those men are relatives of Ivan Milat, and they have a knife; wait with me for the next train, dear,” as she dragged the girl onto the platform.

“Who’s Ivan Milat?” said the girl.

Oh, how Posie remembered what it was like to be that innocent, that unworldly, that unknowing of the evil in the world!

“A notorious serial killer, dear,” said Posie. “He buried a lot of bodies in the Belanglo Forest. And quite possibly a lot of other places, too.”

It turned out that the girl had been getting off at Chatswood anyway, so she was very grateful to Posie for waking her up. She insisted on waiting with Posie till the next
train to the city arrived, even though Posie tried to explain that it had all been a ruse, that she had only pretended to need help getting off the train. But there was no convincing the girl; in the end, Posie gave up.

Glad to be out of the rain, Clementine waited patiently. She knew she was too early but she didn’t mind waiting. Not here in the warmth and busyness where she felt familiar and safe. She sat watching the punters and listening to their queries. Their complaints, hesitation, belligerence, confusion. Less frequently: their gratefulness, thanks, appreciation, apology. She enjoyed identifying the types before they revealed themselves; some things were universal and you could tell them by looking.

There were certainly a lot of them waiting and it was only mid-morning Friday. She wondered what City Central was like in peak hour.

A young man brushed past her, almost treading on her foot. She tucked both feet closer to her. He leant on the counter. “Mate, anyone hand in a wallet? We just come up to Sydney for the weekend, my girlfriend reckons she dropped it just about a block away.”

Optimistic, thought Clementine. She could tell the policeman behind the counter thought so too. ‘What kind of an idiot are you?’ was written all over his face.

“Mate, sorry. No wallets today.”

The young man drooped a little, said thanks and walked back out into the rain to his girl, put his arm around her and said something. Clementine saw her droop too, as the young man took charge of the oversize umbrella.

Next up, a flustered suit with peroxide hair. Dripping, with panic in her voice. “My car has been clamped. I must get home before my husband.”

“You need to try the Council for that.” The policeman sounded extremely polite but Clementine was fairly confident she knew what he was thinking this time too.

“I’d like to speak to … A man stole my wallet … I’m here to report a traffic accident … ”

Something was slightly different; Clementine realised it was the lack of threatened violence. The lack of overt aggression, the lack of abuse and the absence of
the unmistakable smell of alcohol. But then, it was only Friday morning.

A young couple awkwardly together, perhaps not so very long a couple, moved to the head of the queue.

“We’d like to speak to someone one about … about something we found, bushwalking.” The young man shifted the pack from one shoulder to another. The young woman nodded in agreement. Clementine noticed how she tapped one foot while she leant her weight on the other leg.

“Something? Did you bring it with you?” The harried constable behind the desk didn’t lift his eyes from the frantic scribbles he was making.

“Some of it.” Both of them looked around, obviously wondering who might be listening to this disclosure. Clementine was quick to look down at her magazine.

The young man shrugged the backpack from his shoulders. He leant over the counter and tried to whisper. But his sotto voce carried. “We found — I think we found a body. I’ve got some of the hard evidence with me, to prove it.” The strain in his voice was apparent. He pulled out some things, some things that Clementine could only see in her peripheral vision. His hand scrunched round a small item; small enough to remain hidden in his palm. But the other item was easy to see. It was a dull white stick-like object.

The constable’s neck snapped up. “You’d better come round this side,” he said, lifting up the gate for the young man and his girlfriend, ushering them down the corridor and out of sight.

#

Posie was so proud of herself that she glowed all the way from Chatswood into town. Still glowing when she got off the train at Town Hall, she shone as she travelled up the escalator, the super-invincible Posie of her childhood. She walked into the volunteer office at least ten feet above the ground and she stuffed envelopes effortlessly for two hours straight, twice as fast as usual, with all the flaps sticking at the first pass, each and every one of them. Both the other volunteers were ill. That could have been a downside to the morning, no-one to tell her story to; but Posie used the time to imagine
how Minnie would enjoy hearing what had happened. ‘Boy oh boy, have I got a story for you,’ she would say to Minnie over tea.

When she went out for a walk late morning, she kept a firm hold on her gun. Her fingers curled around the pearl handle, holding tight. It was a talisman, after all. All these years she had carried it, and all these years she had been kept safe. She noticed three boys coming down the steps as she was going up, they were little more than children, wearing their big brothers’ shirts and pants, loose and floppy, almost falling off. She gripped the pistol harder as she returned their smile. She didn’t like to judge, but why were they all looking at her? And why would they smile at an old lady, if not to take her off guard?

Sure enough, her handbag was yanked from her arm so fast that if she hadn’t been holding the gun she would have lost it. As it was, the handbag straps dangled (cut through, which was lucky, if it had been pulled off her arm, she might have been pulled over with it). Her hand automatically clutched the gun more tightly, and she found herself pointing the pistol at the boys (the safety was off, of course), naked for all to see now that the handbag covering it was gone.

“Shit, she’s got a gun!” yelled one of them. “Run for it!” And the gang of three did just that, throwing away her handbag as they ran. She noticed that one of them kept hold tight of her emergency purse, ha! they would have a rude shock when they realised there was only a crumpled $5 note inside. Posie always kept her real purse around her waist in a traveller’s wallet when she caught the train. It could be inconvenient, but it kept things safe. She saw, as they leapt back up the stairs, how the crowds parted to let them pass, and how people pulled out their mobiles as the boys ran away. But no-one chased after them to stop them. People were running away, but not after the boys.

As if from a long way away, Posie saw herself thrust her gun out of sight into the feature pocket, and heard herself crying in a shaky, squeaky voice, “Stop, thief! My purse!”

#

Peter had taken a detour to JB Hi-Fi, where he spent a pleasurable hour or so,
then taken his time in the supermarket, smelling the produce, considering packets of Iced Vo Vos and shortbread, remembering to buy toothpaste. He was on the hunt for an umbrella when he heard, indistinctly, in the distortion of the area under Town Hall Station, a yell that sounded like “He’s got a gun!”, repeated and amplified through a confusing crescendo of voices.

As, following the noise, he ran up the stairs from the station into the square at Town Hall, he nearly cannoned into an elderly lady falling backwards downstairs. Somehow he slowed and caught her — she wasn’t a frail old lady, she felt like a ton of bricks rather than a feather — and then sank slowly to his knees, cushioning her fall.

“Are you all right?” he said.

“Police,” said a voice behind him, and he almost let the old lady go. Was this some kind of trick? But no — he craned his head round — the man was holding up police ID as he bent to pick up a handbag and handed it to a woman, who brandished her ID at Peter too.

“Are you all right?” Peter said again.

“Let go of that lady please sir,” said the policeman. “Do you have a weapon, sir?”

“A weapon?” Peter’s heart (who would have thought it?) hammered so loudly he knew they could hear it. This was not the way he wanted, needed, to engage the law in this town. He had to keep his profile low. “I don’t have a weapon.”

“Let the lady go,” said the policeman again. Peter noticed that he’d dropped the “sir”.

Slowly, Peter bent further toward the ground. Perhaps he could seat her on a step before his heart popped right out of his chest.

“Please do not let me go.” He felt the old lady tremble with the cost of speech. “If you could assist me to turn around, that would be wonderful. Officer, this young man has quite possibly saved my life.”

“Well, I think that might be a bit generous,” said Peter, carefully readjusting his grip on her.

“The thugs that tried to steal from me are gone, they ran like rabbits,” said Posie as Peter helped her turn round. She clung to his arm. “Perhaps we might move off these
steps, dear.”

Obligingly, he led her up onto level ground. He was pleased to see the rain had stopped; no need to hunt out an umbrella now.

“I’m afraid they took your purse from your handbag,” said the policewoman sympathetically, head down as she checked inside it.

Posie flapped a hand. “Oh, that was only my emergency purse. Just in case I get mugged. One hears so many sad stories these days, where people have failed to take the most elementary precautions and have lost their identities, not to mention their money. My real purse is in my traveller’s wallet round my waist. Well, around what passes for my waist these days.” With her free hand, Posie patted her stomach. “Just in case.”

“We’ll take it from here,” said the policeman, nodding to Peter, who nodded back. The policeman turned all his attention to Posie. “Madam? How are you? Would you like to come down to the station with us and make a report?”

Posie kept her hand firmly in her pocket, on her gun. “Do you really think I need do so? Oh, young man!”

Peter was trying to merge into the crowd.

“Thank-you so much for being in the right place at the right time. I feel as though I should reward you in some way.”

“Not at all,” said Peter. “It was really my pleasure to help.” He stepped back another foot.

“I will pray for you,” called Posie, as Peter waved, and stepped out of sight. What an exciting story she had to tell now!

“Probably a good idea,” said the policeman.

“To pray?” The young policewoman sounded sceptical.

Posie heard the policeman snort. “To come down to the station, Senior Constable, as I’m sure you realise. Especially if they had a gun.” He gave Posie his full attention again. “I thought I heard somebody yell something about your attackers having a gun.”

“Goodness!” said Posie, opening her eyes as wide as she could. “I may have had a narrow escape.”

“You’ve had a shock. Why not come with us, and have someone collect you
from the station,” said the policewoman, deftly putting a hand under Posie’s elbow.

“My nephew works in town,” said Posie. “I am sure he could come and collect me. Perhaps that would be wise.” It had been such a morning, after all, and she needed to save her energy for the baking she and Minnie had planned for this afternoon.

“Nice cup of tea and a bikkie,” said the policeman. He offered Posie his arm.

“A police escort!” said Posie, beaming. She accepted the arm offered by the good-looking young policeman, clinging tightly with her other hand to the gun in her pocket. Those nasty creatures on the train earlier had left her feeling vulnerable and in need of rescue. Although they had also done her a favour, she had them to thank for her quick draw. For if she hadn’t already been alert to danger, would she have had her hand on her gun? She could have lost it, lost her father’s precious gift! “Thank you, Inspector.” Would the young man be an Inspector yet? Posie was rather hazy as to police rank, but she thought perhaps not. Inspectors in the crime shows on television tended to be on the older side. But Inspector sounded nice, and it had been an Inspector who called in that old movie her father had liked so much. The young man was unlikely to object to being called an Inspector. “Of course, I don’t have my gun with me when I am out walking at home. I go with Minerva.” But why didn’t she take the gun? It would probably be a good idea, in future. Minerva swore by her martial arts, but Posie knew nothing of martial arts.

“Your gun?” The policeman took a firmer grip on Posie’s arm, and Posie saw the policewoman discreetly drop back a pace or two and rummage in Posie’s handbag. They were walking down Bathurst Street now, down the side of St Andrew’s Cathedral. There were masses of people. It was the kind of crowd where it could be easy to lose your footing, but Posie felt very safe now, police on either side of her, gun in her pocket. Though it would be wiser, perhaps, not to mention the gun again.

“It’s starting to rain,” said the policewoman, urgently.

“Just a block or so to go,” said the policeman. “Time for us to clock off, too. You go up and order us sit-down coffees so we can debrief. Large double strength cappuccino for me, I’ll drop this lady into the station.”

The policewoman smiled at Posie and said, “Take care,” holding out Posie’s handbag to the policeman.
“Thank you so much,” said Posie, as she stepped through the door of the police station on the arm of the Inspector.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Dinosaur Tales

Robbie had walked the police out the front of the Museum.

“We’re looking at extra electronic surveillance, possibly human surveillance as well. Though the budget probably won’t allow it.” Robbie attempted to look as gloomy and serious as Sergeant Gallagher did on making this pronouncement. “I expect you know all about budgetary constraints.”

“Absolutely,” said Robbie. The irony! “But the extra surveillance — you’ll let us know, officially?”

He was pleased to hear ‘of course’, and even more pleased to learn it wouldn’t be in the next week. Able to wave them goodbye with a genuine smile, he felt the proverbial spring in his step on his way back to his office. Once there, he leant his weight into the window, pressing his nose to the pane. The rain was less frenzied now and the wind was sleeping, but the damage was done in Hyde Park. Sodden grass, strewn leaves, bedraggled ibises and tourists.

What had the police really thought? It had gone better than he had expected. Their questions had hardly been probing. Of course, he had been a sort of fill-in interview, not the man they’d planned to see. Perhaps they had decided that since he so obviously knew nothing they were wasting their time. One could hope. He tapped his fingers on the pane a few times, good old giveaway hands, they had been so well behaved while the police were visiting, they were entitled to a few high jinks now. He squashed his nose into the glass again. Wished he were home, ensconced in his study with his animals and his love. Ella would understand. The old familiar anger snarled. Took him by surprise. He had been doing so well lately, felt himself inflated with life, with some hope. False hope, Robbie. Where was the elixir to bring back the dead? All those medical miracles to make life continue and to make it easier to live, but the only thing that could really help the living was to have their loved ones right alongside them.

The snarling started up again, predictably, drearily, leonine in its rage. Robbie heard it as clearly as he saw the rain foiling his vision out the window. He knew that
mid-life was just around the corner. Maybe it was already here. Technically, at thirty-nine he supposed he could be in the thick of it. Would he have to start balancing, recalibrating, facing his demons; more demons? Heaven help you! Yes, if everything he’d been told was true. A big if.

Still, there was no need to start right now. He pushed away from the pane. Right now he needed to concentrate on what he was going to say at the opening. That was what he needed to do right now.

He would go and look at the dinosaurs. That would calm him down. Some of his biggest and best ideas had come to him when he was looking at dinosaurs.

Padding quickly through the staff corridors, Robbie slipped into the public area via the endangered species hall. About to turn right, he stopped. There, next to the entrance to the dinosaur hall was Brett, talking on his mobile, clutching his stomach. Was it too late to get away? It was difficult enough to avoid Brett at home. But too late, he had been seen. Brett was waving as he snapped his mobile closed.

“Oh, hello,” said Robbie.

“Robbie! Great to see you, mate,” said Brett. “Just talking to Sally. Told her I’d got to wind it up because I spotted you. It’s been a long time.” He reminded Robbie of Riki Tiki when Robbie got home from work. Pat me, pat me, rub my tummy. Robbie wanted to turn and walk away, but it would have looked so obvious that he was doing so in order to avoid Brett. You know he tries so hard, he really likes you, he’d like to be like you. And anyway he’s Sally’s husband. None of which had changed. Ah well, better to meet in public than in private. And the dimness of the dinosaur room made it a good place to keep hidden what a person really felt. Robbie forced a smile as he entered the cavernous space.

“So,” he said. “How’s it going?”

“Great, really great,” said Brett, nodding. “Weird thing happened to me in the park yesterday, though. Got accosted by some joker in a cape and top hat.”

Robbie’s eyes flickered to the huge screen, across which scrolled the message ‘film commencing one minute’. “Really? Have you seen the film?”

“No, I was actually just going to grab some lunch. Saw you.” Brett hesitated. “There was something really weird about that guy. I mean, magicians are for kiddies,
Robbie heard the unstated plea, would Robbie join him for lunch, chat about the weird magician. Chat about anything. Hating to have to openly refuse and witness the puppy-dog sadness that would consume Brett, Robbie kept the focus on dinosaurs. “It’s worth watching,” said Robbie, willing the film to start before Brett spoke again.

“Aren’t they cute,” said someone, as the baby dinosaurs trundled inelegantly to the water’s edge. It was an idyllic scene of grassy paradise.

Until the predator loomed out of the jungle. The baby dinosaurs all reared and screamed and ran for cover. It was pretty easy to see that they wouldn’t all make it.

“Don’t look, kids! Close your eyes!” One mother put her hands over the eyes of her three or four year old. Robbie thought she would be better to let them watch what happened. They could learn about life from watching this, learn how important it was to drink the quickest, stay at the front of the pack, run the fastest. Get the girl and keep her safe at home. Don’t let her out to play in the forest, or the bush. It really is a jungle out there. That was the way of the world, survival of the fittest and the fastest.

The law of nature wasn’t about what was right and was impervious to how hard you tried or how truthful you were or how much you loved. Extinction was a real threat, an ever-present possibility.

It was a bit too close to home.

Film finished, Robbie knew Brett would be asking him something again. He was delighted when his mobile rang, and answered it loudly. “Hello, Robbie Ravell.” What he heard didn’t seem to make much sense, but then, so many things so often didn’t now. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He pressed ‘end’, turned to Brett. “Posie’s been mugged. She’s at the police station and they want me to pick her up. The Spirit House will have to wait.”

“Gosh, sure, no worries,” said Brett. “Is Posie okay?”

“They say she is,” said Robbie.

“See you later,” Brett called as Robbie hurried back to his office to pick up his wallet. “Or not. I’m working school hours today.”
The rain was subdued, but Robbie filched a big black umbrella from lost property. No-one was strolling pleasurably across Hyde Park. The footpaths teemed with jostling plastic domes and he opened his to join the pack. Umbrella land was on the move, crossing streets at the traffic lights, dodging everywhere. Robbie found himself humming the old tune from childhood as he slipped into the throng. _That umbrella went with a don’t-care air._ He liked this quality of rain in the city. The Starbucks on the corner of Elizabeth and Park Street was packed with people who all seemed to be looking glumly out the window to the street or the park. Robbie fancied that heads turned to watch him hurrying past as though he was some exotic species.

Two blocks, three, and he was folding the umbrella, resigned to its dripping menace, at the top of the stairs leading down to Town Hall station. He poked, hastening his passage past a group of St Andrew’s schoolboys congregated at the bottom of the stairs. He turned right, then left, then right again down the underground avenue of Town Hall shops. Thought about grabbing sushi and dismissed the thought as quickly — it was too cold a day, what about a meat pie? But there were queues in the cafes and noise in the food hall. He kept on going, past Kathmandu, Paddy Pallin, down to Sussex Street and all the way to City Central.

Robbie trod carefully through the wet and muddy lobby and leant on the counter, before someone could tell him to join the end of the queue, to wait his turn. “My elderly aunt was the victim of an attempted mugging up at Town Hall earlier,” he said, politely. “I’m here to pick her up.” He was ushered in to a stale-smelling room where Posie sat talking, drinking tea and eating biscuits. Robbie thought the policeman with her looked harassed.

“Ah, Robbie dear, how good of you to come,” she said. “Inspector, this is my nephew, Robbie.”

“Robbie Ravell,” said Robbie, offering his hand.

“It’s just Constable,” murmured the young man. “Constable Hendricks. Everyone calls me Jimmy.”

Posie nodded her head. “Just Constable so far, dear, one has to start somewhere. But I can see the future.” Constable Hendricks wriggled his shoulders as though trying
to remove an uncomfortable weight. Robbie felt sorry for him. Posie had been there quite a while.

“Are you okay, Posie?” Robbie thought she seemed much better than okay. She seemed in her element. A captive audience, constrained by social nicety and by youth and law. Happy days for Posie.

“Never better, dear, just having a few adventures on my day out in town.” Posie smiled, patted her handbag, held it up for Robbie’s inspection. “But I own that I feel a little weary now. At my age one needs, really, to limit excitements. It will be good to have a comfy ride home with you in your car.”

“Your aunt has had a lucky escape,” began the Constable. “She was assaulted by some young blokes — ”

“They had a knife!” Posie’s voice rose dramatically at the end of the sentence. Even semi-prepared as he was, knowing Posie, Robbie leaned forward.

Hendricks leant forward, too. “Which they only used to cut the straps of your Aunty’s handbag so it came off her shoulder — ”

“And then a good Samaritan broke what would have been a nasty fall down the steps,” said Posie. “Providence.”

“Just coincidence, our blokes were on the spot, brought your aunt along here.”

“And all’s well that ends well,” said Posie.

Jimmy Hendricks said he was happy to bring Posie out the front when Robbie came back with the car. If Robbie could just call his mobile, he would be waiting for the call. Robbie felt slightly foolish that he’d not even thought of the fact that of course Posie would need to be driven, that he’d walked, but the policeman seemed to take it for granted that his anxiety for Posie’s welfare had overridden practicalities. “I’ll be as fast as I can,” said Robbie, and he saw the relief in the young policeman’s eyes.

#

“My, doesn’t the traffic whizz past fast these days,” said Posie. “Such a long time since I motored into the city! Do you know, I doubt I would enjoy driving such a distance in such busy traffic any more.”
“I doubt that any of us would enjoy you doing so,” said Robbie.

“But I am forgetting! Excitement always has that effect on me. Did you have a nice day? A productive day, isn’t that what people ask now? Is everything in order for tomorrow? Minerva and myself are so looking forward to it. We plan to cook just a few more treats tonight.”

“A few touches still to be made,” said Robbie. “But basically ship shape and Bristol fashion.”

“Lily can come to us after school, if it will help you,” said Posie. “She can help us taste test.”

“Thanks, Posie, but you might want to have a rest, after your busy morning.”

Robbie paused. “It does sound like you were lucky.”

“Very fortunate, but you see, after meeting some of Ivan Milat’s relatives on the train this morning, I was prepared, and had my hand on my gun, just in case,” said Posie. “Everything works together, mysteriously.”

“A gun?” said Robbie. “What gun?” Ivan Milat? Was this the beginning of the end of Posie as he knew her?

“My dear father’s gun, of course,” said Posie. “Really, Robbie, I am surprised you should ask. What other gun would fit in my handbag.”

Robbie looked at the shiny black handbag. Squatting, voluminous, on Posie’s lap. “Did the police see the gun?”

“No, but they heard the boy shouting about it, so they knew there was one. They didn’t seem very interested, really. Which surprised me a little. But still, it wasn’t as though I fired it. And the first Inspector was in a hurry, he had to leave me with the other Inspector while he went out again.”

“Ah,” said Robbie. “So where is the gun now?”

“In my pocket, of course,” said Posie. “Don’t worry, Robbie, I always leave the safety on.”

Was this fantasy? Could Posie really be carrying a gun in her pocket? Robbie couldn’t see, the black handbag was in the way. “But isn’t it illegal to carry loaded guns around?” said Robbie. “I mean, do you have a licence?”

“Fiddle-dee-dee,” said Posie. “My father never had a licence. Now, Robbie, tell
me, how is Hugh? I had heard that Katie has been at your house rather a lot recently.”

“There you go, then,” said Robbie. “You probably know more than me.”

“In fact, Minerva and I observed her car parked, that is, Tanya’s car, but Katie was driving it, in your driveway.” Posie coughed. “We asked them round for afternoon tea, and I am quite sure that Hugh and Katie consider they are going together.”

How did Posie manage to know more about his son than he did? And who would have thought she would recognise Tanya’s car; which reminded him, he needed to return her call. Well, at least now he wouldn’t put his foot in it if she mentioned Hugh and her little sister. Should he be depressed at more evidence of his failure as a father, or grateful that Hugh had his great-aunty watching out for his welfare?

Although it was only early afternoon, the deluge had slowed the M2 to a fast crawl. Robbie was pleased he had left early. It would be a slow crawl later on. “You’re sure you’re okay?” he asked again.

“As soon as I get home and have a nice cup of tea with Minnie, I will be more than okay,” said Posie, yawning. “Meanwhile, I may take the opportunity to refresh myself with a little nap. There is such an interesting series about murderers on the ABC on Friday nights. Last week it was most engrossing. One of the woman in her sixties, perhaps a little older, poisoned several of her relatives and friends. She put thallium in their afternoon teas. Here in Sydney, in my lifetime! Oh, it was very good. I would like to feel fresh to watch the next one tonight.”

“Go right ahead,” said Robbie. “Put the seat back and nod off as long as you like.” He had enough trouble with his own thoughts while driving, without anyone else’s confusing him.

She was asleep almost before he finished speaking. The shock, Robbie thought. He’d better make sure Minerva was home before he left her. Did Minerva know about the gun? If there really was a gun. It all sounded very odd; guns had no place in the story of Posie. He remembered how anxious he’d been prior to his first meeting with Ella’s surrogate mother. Her real mother, for all intents and purposes of nurture.

“You’ll love Posie,” Ella had said. “You’ll really get her. She’s like somebody from another era. A Victorian, almost. And Minerva’s the same, in a different kind of way.”

The word Victorian had alarmed him and set him on the wrong track, despite Ella’s
reassurances. He’d pictured an always-‘dressed’ disciplinarian, attentive to duty and
God, a person who bestowed measured and heavy approval sometimes and, more often
and significantly, a heavier disapproval. A person much like his own guardians;
significantly, a person unlikely to approve of him as suitor to the much-loved, much-
gifted Eleanora. A person who would scoff at his passion for the animal kingdom, his
nerdy interest in natural science, his enjoyment of children’s stories. A person who
couldn’t, wouldn’t understand that Robbie had no interest in business, politics and
computers. He still remembered his relief, after that first richly creamed and doily-ed
afternoon-tea.

He shifted, switched windscreen wipers on, then off. It wasn’t really raining any
more, just drizzling. He rode the clutch and moved some ten metres along the freeway
and some ten years back in his mind. To that last morning, that last precious vision of
her.

Ella had been very happy that morning, and pleased — almost ecstatic, he
thought, looking back — that he had taken Lily round to Posie’s, that she would have
the whole day to herself. She had been mysterious about what she planned to do, but
that was Ella’s way. He had thought nothing of it, had known that when he got home
that night she would be bursting to tell him of the day’s doings. ‘Bursting with secrets
that I can’t keep from you’, was what she used to say. He could hear her saying it now.

He looked over at Posie, curled into the corner of the seat. A feeling of
gratefulness washed over him. If not for Posie, he could not have kept going, despite the
children, despite his work, despite the hope that had hardly faded with the years. He
would have collapsed under the weight of all the things that needed organising, doing, if
not for Posie. She had managed his life, his children and his hope; for all these years she
had kept them alive.

His phone rang. He scrambled in his pocket. “Hello?” he whispered.

“Robbie? Are you okay? You sound funny.”

It was Sally. “Sal — I’m fine. But Posie’s had a bit of a shock. I’m driving her
home now.”

“Oh, Robbie! Driving? I’ll call you later. I just rang to see what I could help
with tomorrow.”
“That’s so kind of you, that would be great. Sorry.” Feeling inadequate, Robbie hung up. He didn’t know what he would have done all these years without Sally, either. She understood, for she had known Ella from childhood.

The rain started again. Soon the windscreen wipers were no use against the downpour. Solid sheets of water slammed the windscreen and encased the car in its own private shower curtain.

A pothole, invisible to Robbie, attempting, with his eyes on the cars ahead to calculate the probable distance between those cars and his own, made itself felt with a thunk and a splash. Sleeping Posie lurched like a rag doll toward the glass. Robbie leaned over to press her away. The car, taken hostage by a waiting current on the road, leaned with him. For a sick-making second Robbie saw a yellow Volvo up close. The outrage and fear on the woman’s face as she braked. He squeezed in front of her. Pushed himself upright and changed down a gear. Didn’t look in the rearview mirror.

Posie opened her eyes. “Are we home already?”

“How near there,” said Robbie.

“Dear Robbie, such thoughtfulness,” murmured Posie, closing her eyes again.

#

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bodies Warm and Cosy

Clementine had lost track of time after the young man with the “hard evidence”. There had been a blur of complainants. At one point an old lady, obviously dressed in her best blue outfit for a day out in town came in, holding tightly to the arm of a youngish policeman. The old lady seemed very animated — “Of course, my nephew has a very important job, he may not be available, but I will perfectly fine, just a little cup of tea and I will be more than fine, I assure you, Inspector” — and not at all like a victim. Which in Clementine’s experience, old ladies usually were. Perhaps she was
just an old duck who was becoming slightly fuddled, and needed to be kept out of the way of the traffic.

A gaggle of teenagers bundled in the door. They were off their faces. Clementine wondered if it was because of Chinese New Year, or just Sydney. Either way, she was in familiar territory. The teenagers were rowdy space invaders competing to see who could make the smartest pun about pigs. Clementine decided it was time to find another place to wait. The rain had eased so now was a good time to make a move.

Looking left up the incline out the door, she saw a coffee shop. Benita surely wouldn’t be too much longer. She could have a cup of coffee while she waited and read a paper. For months she had avoided the news, but maybe now was as good a time as any to stop doing so.

There were a few people standing around waiting for takeaways. Clementine joined the queue for orders, flicking through a paper left behind while she waited. The weather was a safe read. She noticed that it was meant to keep raining heavily for the rest of the week. Lucky she’d brought that umbrella. Her eyes strayed across the small columns on the inside page. An arsonist burning down his ex’s home. Some suspicion that women were being stalked by a disturbed individual that lived in a cave in a national park. A man arrested on suspicion of murdering his wife, despite his pleas on television for her to come home. Nothing new, then.

The coffee shop was crowded and the only free seats were at the back, next to the wall. Clementine headed over, taking the table marker for her order with her. But she stopped in her tracks when she saw Benita, sitting with some bloke who looked vaguely familiar. She hesitated for a second, but only for a second. Benny looked … resigned rather than engaged.

“Well, he’s clearly not normal. A mad scientist type. And that photo of the rat on his desk!” Only a few feet away, Clementine couldn’t help overhearing.

“He said it was something he was researching,” said her friend.

“Even so. A rat.” Clementine heard the scorn, the disbelief. She waited, looking for the proper moment to interrupt.

“Who has a photo of a rat on their desk? People have photos of their family. Or holiday shots, or their pets. And the way he spoke to us … except when he got onto
cane toads. He didn’t want to talk about those missing exhibits at all. He couldn’t even tell us how many were missing, or where we could find an inventory.” His disbelief was evident.

“Maybe he didn’t know,” said Benita, shrugging her shoulders and sitting back. “Clemmy! What are you doing here?” The look on her friend’s face made Clementine laugh. “He said he didn’t know. Sir, this is an old friend of mine, Clem Stoney. Clem, this is my boss, Detective Sergeant Trevor Gallagher.”

“Hello,” said Gallagher. Clementine noticed he gave her a quick look up and down.

“She’s with the job,” said Benny. “Interstate.”

Clementine smiled. Technically, it was true.

“Oh, okay.” Gallagher’s mobile rang. “Shit.” He scraped his chair back. “Sir.” He swaggered outside, pulling a notebook from his pocket, phone balanced between his neck and shoulder.

“We’re nearly done,” said Benita. “Thank whoever! Just debriefing. So how are you?” She pulled a chair over to sit at the table with her friend. “Oh no, he’s coming back.”

Clementine thought Gallagher was smirking as he sat down again and slurped the last of his coffee. “Carruthers had a good idea, a great idea. For us to attend the exhibition opening. Unfortunately, I’ll be out of town — the girlfriend’s sister’s engagement do. So it’s over to you.”

Clementine recognised the false quality of Benita’s smile. “Great.”

“Turns out Carruthers knows Dr Ravell. Not sure how. Anyway — long and the short, Carruthers says,” — Gallager looked at his notes — “that Dr Ravell probably has some more practical folk working for him, or else how could he have got to where he is. Says we should try and interview them, the more practical folk. Says, and I quote,” — he looked at his notebook again — “He’s unlikely to refuse permission. It won’t look good for the museum if it gets out that their dead animals are growing legs and escaping.” His phone beeped, and he looked at his watch. “Okay, deed done, I’ve got to rush. Thanks for the coffee, Constable. Nice to meet you, Clem.” He pushed back his chair and moved fast toward the door, texting on the way.
“So, what do you reckon?” Benita’s eyes rolled skywards.

Clementine smiled, leant forward. “Your buddy thinks he’s dealing with a madman. He’s got the case sewn up lock, stock and double barrels. He’s not a big fan of rats. The mad scientist is really, really keen on cane toads as well as rats. And your big boss, Carruthers … is a lot more perceptive and reasonable than your buddy.”

Benita laughed. “True, true, as they say out your way. We call him Gallstones, you can see why. Okay, enough with the shop talk, tell me about you.” She drained her coffee, peered into Clementine’s cup. “Oh, you’re still going. Drink up, drink up, let’s go for a walk, while the rain’s given up. I’ll just pop in at station for two ticks and get changed. We might as well jiffy on down to the Quay. Be nice for you to see the water, I’d say.” That was Benita, from go to whoa in under ten seconds, as Bart used to put it. He’d never really liked her.

Clementine blew on her coffee. “Mine’s still hot, why don’t you get changed and meet me back here? I’m over hanging around the police station.”

“Okay, I get that,” said Benita. In a lithe movement she swung herself out of her seat and strode out the door. It was good to see Benny again. Good to see that she hadn’t changed. Thank God or whoever that some things didn’t. Clementine found she was even looking forward to the disaster romance stories that were sure to be forthcoming. She swallowed the last of her coffee when she saw her friend bounding back up the hill.

The rain was taking a rest and as they walked back toward George Street, Clementine was surprised to see how many people seemed to be crowding the streets. “Unusually busy, or is this Sydney these days?” she murmured.

“Chinese New Year,” said Benita. “Think that must be it. And it’s a Friday. People knocking off early, out for a few drinks after work.” The conversation flowed easily. No ferreting for meaning, no awkward silences where understanding was uncertain or where confidences were being judged. Clementine had forgotten how good it felt to be with someone where there was such minimal accommodation to be made.

Benita talked about the date she’d had recently, a date which took her from Martin Place to a city bar to a romantic walk around to the Opera House. “Perfect evening, about 24 degrees, hardly any wind, middle of the week so not too many people.
“Perfect!” her friend sighed. Clementine waited for the punch line. Benita’s relationships — even the dates — always seem to end in a punch line. It came when they were a block from the Quay. “Then, after we’d had drinks, dinner and knew that it was mutual — and it was our second date, too, not the first — just when I’d decided that he probably looked as good without the drinks as with them, he mentioned oh and by the way would I like to attend a sex party with him that night.” Benita snorted. “And he seriously thought I’d jump at the chance!”

Clementine snorted in sympathy. And then the wind brought an assault of tangy air to her nostrils and she was no longer paying attention to her friend. They walked close to the ocean, past the ferry wharves, where the sea could be glimpsed in swatches of teal, opaque and undulating as though some many-humped creatures swam endlessly beneath its surface, breathing in and out in great uneven gulps. Clementine knew the pull of the deep determined the shaping of the wave. Once that shift had started, somewhere out of sight, out of mind, there was nothing that could stop it. The ferries were solid, built to outlast the tempestuousness of the sea, but Clementine had been on a ferry once in a storm, crossing to Neutral Bay or Cremorne, for a reason now forgotten, when the ferocity of the storm had meant that it couldn’t be anchored safely to the wharf. Someone, a not-so young man in a suit, had tried to jump and had fallen, slipped off-balance in his city slicker shoes as he leapt. Clementine could still see the image of him hitting the water. Could still hear the sucking sound of the ocean as it embraced him. Passers-by had pulled the man to safety. Now Clementine wondered if that incident had been a neon light for that man. Had he said, thank my lucky stars I’m alive? Or had he cursed the weather, Sydney Ferries, his expensive work shoes, even perhaps focused on his own clumsiness, his lack of athletic ability and prowess? His stupidity in trusting his body to complete the task he set for it. Had he realised his mortality that day? Clementine felt her stomach roil with the waves. She felt an unaccountable urgency to flee the water, to get away from the things under the surface.

The rain started again, desultory, but enough to warrant unswaddling her umbrella. Clementine shivered.

“I guess this is cold, for you,” said Benita. “Looks like a bit of a wind coming up. We want somewhere cosy for a chinwag and some vino.” She cast her eye along
the Quay. “Actually, I know just the place.”

Ensconced in a corner of the long rectangular room, million-dollar view of ocean, bridge and ferry taking all available space, Clementine felt herself relax a little more. “Any more boy stories?” she asked.

“Just one,” said her friend, fidgeting with her hair. “But it’s soooo early days. But if you come out with us tonight you’ll meet him, probably. He said he’d come. I warned him it was heaps of girls.” Benita shook her head and grinned. “Now, let’s get down to business. What’s going on?”

Clementine parried many of the skillful thrusts for information and when she felt her energy becoming low she said, “Benny, I’m not quite ready for this.”

“Zip,” said Benita, and she immediately segued into persuading Clementine to stay in town that evening, not hop on a train to the burbs.

“We’re going to Chinatown, to see the sights and eat great food. Probably BBQ King. Should be fun.”

“Not this time,” said Clementine, smiling. “Emily’s waiting. But soon.”

“Okay, well let’s walk you up to Wynyard, then and find a choo-choo. You could catch one here, but then you’d have to change, not worth the platform shuffling.”

Blending back into the tourist stream, they retraced their steps along the ferry wharves and turned left up George St. Although it was only just past 3pm, the previously empty cafes and pubs were already filling with Friday crowds determined to have a good time.

“If you change your mind, we’re not going till around six,” Benita yelled over the background of station announcements. “Tons of time for a rethink!”

Clementine laughed and waved. Benny was such good company, she felt better than she had for weeks, freer, lighter. If she wasn’t so looking forward to seeing Emily she would have been tempted to stay, despite her fatigue.

#

Posie woke as they pulled into her driveway. The rain had eased to a drizzle again. “Thank you, my dear, no, please don’t get out, I am quite all right, quite capable. There is no point in your getting wet.” It took an effort, but she was out of the car.
before he could turn off the engine, waving as she slammed the door and hurried to the
verandah. As if to greet her, water began to fall heavily again.

Robbie came up the path behind her. “I’m not leaving till I’ve seen Minnie,” he
said firmly.

“Oh, fiddle,” said Posie. She poked her key at the door but it didn’t go in.

“You see?” said Robbie, taking it from her. “You’ve had a shock.”

“Minnie?” called Posie as the door swung open. “She must be out the back,” said
Posie. “With Baskerville.” She led Robbie into the lounge room. “See?”

Robbie could indeed see the two figures in the glasshouse, the two footed and the
four.

“I’ll just have a quick word with Minnie. Why don’t you go and get changed,”
he said. He knew her habits well, as soon as you got home you changed your good
clothes so that you could wear them next time.

“So unnecessary,” Posie muttered, but she couldn’t be bothered arguing with
Robbie. It was so rare for him to be insistent about anything that it would probably be a
waste of her time and energy, anyway. Besides, she could tell Minnie her own story in
her own time, Robbie hadn’t been there and he wouldn’t know any of the details.
Waving permission and goodbye at him — “Thank you so much for the lift in your car,
dear” — she headed toward her room.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Robbie called after her.

“Certainly, dear,” said Posie, but she wasn’t really listening. She hung her jacket
carefully on its wooden hanger, put her bag under her bed, her good shoes in the
cupboard, her stockings neatly rolled in the pile of dirty washing. She changed her
pretty skirt (she could wear it one more time at least) for some serviceable slacks and put
on her comfortable house shoes. Then she went to the laundry, took an umbrella and her
Crocs (how wonderfully useful these shoes were for a gardener, how her mother would
have loved them) and carefully picked her way via paving stones to the glasshouse.

Posie creaked the door open. The dog attempted to jump and paw, but “No,”
said Posie, glaring, and he stopped. Minerva’s substantial tartan backside was bent over
the plantlings.

“Hello,” said Posie. “Have you had a nice day, Minnie?”
“Aren’t you home a little early, Posie?” Minerva stayed bent over, pressing and smoothing the soil.

“Dear Robbie gave me a lift. He collected me from the police station after a little incident.”

Minerva straightened, coriander and mint in hand. “He said something about it, I wasn’t paying too much attention. The weeds have quite taken over here. What happened? Are you alright?”

“I am quite alright but I think a cup of tea might be nice about now, don’t you?” Posie looked at her watch. “Yes, tea o’clock as my dear father used to say. I’ll just put the kettle on while you clean up.”

Minerva washed her hands and the herbs in the laundry, brought in the bundles of coriander and mint and laid them in the herb colander.

Posie poured out tea and set the milk jug and the plate of plain and cheese scones and lamingtons in the centre of the table. “Well — it started at Epping, really —” and her tea grew cold, her scone untasted, while she recounted all the doings of the day. She had reached the police-to-the-rescue part of the story when her friend interrupted.

“You’re in shock,” said Minerva.

“Oh, no, I feel fine, almost energized, really,” said Posie, though even as she said it she had a peculiar feeling, as if all the air was being squashed out of her, ever so slowly.

Minerva snorted. “You’re clearly not fine. This brew is — pardon my French — piss weak.” She got up from the table and poured her undrunk tea down the sink.

“S’not French,” Posie murmured, but oh dear, she did feel rather weak.

Minerva went out of the room and Posie heard a tinkling, clinking noise. Minerva came back with a crystal glassful of faintly amber liquid. “Sherry, medicinal,” she said, thrusting it at Posie. “You need to lie down for a while. It’s Robbie’s big day tomorrow and you want to be completely fresh for that.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Posie. She was partial to a glass of sherry, though a little later in the evening, more usually. Taken just before bedtime, while she read a thriller or a romance. But perhaps if she had a little lie down now, she could have a little read, too. “Just let me finish the story, first,” she said, and proceeded to do so.
“Don’t think about those nasty men any more,” said Minerva. “Have a good sleep and see if you feel up to any baking after that.”

“Perhaps you are right, Minnie. A little rest and I will be right as rain.”

*
Robbie squeezed the car into the garage, promising himself yet again that he’d move the stacks of old paint tins and broken bits and pieces propped up against one of the side walls. Careful to avoid scraping the car door against the wall, he made a dash for the house, whistling for Riki Tiki as he went. Hugh could not be guaranteed to let the dog in when it rained, even supposing that he thought about it. Robbie could appreciate why Hugh didn’t want Riki Tiki around while he was working. Riki Tiki was not the sort of dog who sat quietly in a corner while you painted. He slobbered and hrumphed, put clumsy feet where he shouldn’t, shed fur on still-wet paint, tried to bite the paintbrush.

Robbie pressed up against the lintel, fumbling with his key ring as Riki Tiki came speeding and scrabbling from around the back, whining softly. They fell into the hall together. Robbie’s shoes were globbed with mud. He pulled them off, dropped them onto the fraying inside doormat. Riki Tiki took off down the hall, too late for Robbie to attempt to wipe his paws. Hugh’s Converse sneakers lay next to the mat, flat and dirty. Hugh’s music reverberated through the house. “Hello!” Robbie called, not expecting a reply. Hugh did not appreciate disturbance of the muse.

Lily might go straight to Posie’s. Part of Robbie, the guilty you-are-a-bad-father part, hoped so. But, if ever there was a time for Posie to have a Lily-less afternoon, it was surely today. No, he would do the right thing, pick Lily up, tell her to stay home this afternoon. But it was early days yet. Time for him to see if he could knock over that speech completely. If he got that out of the way, he could enjoy his glass of wine properly later. Meanwhile, what about a spot of lunch, or at least a piece of toast? Robbie, the gourmet. If he spread it with peanut butter, ate an apple and a carrot as well, he’d be covering all the food groups. Robbie put a piece of toast in the toaster and opened the peanut butter cupboard, stepping back as a clump of bush cockroaches fell onto the floor. Riki Tiki snapped and growled but most of them slithered into unseeable cracks.

Toast popped, slathered, Robbie clomped downstairs to his study and unlocked the door. “No,” he muttered to Riki Tiki, feeling mean. He shut the study door in the dog’s face, heard the thump and sigh as the dog settled against the door on the other
side, his bulk meant acting as a kind of enormous carpet snake against the draught.

Robbie sat briefly on the lounge, swinging his feet up and chewing his toast. The room looked faded in the rainlight, and it felt cold, though not damp. Robbie ran the dehumidifier often, very conscious of the need for a mould-free zone. Swallowing the last of the toast, he stood up, stretching. Switched the kettle on. Pulled out some milk from the bar fridge and opened the jar of lolly snakes. Popped a few in his mouth and a tea bag into the old mug. Waiting for the kettle to boil, he put on Carnival of the Animals, leant against the desk and sank again into the pleasure of the room. He and Ella had created it together to be their room, a place where they could enter and immediately immerse themselves, together, in their once upon a time, the stuff of fairytales, volumes of which marched in pride of place along the bookshelves of his study, jostling for attention with the books on natural selection and island biodiversity and Ella’s books from childhood. Here, he rejuvenated, rebirthed, transformed and transcended his everyday life. Ooh, big words, Robbie, he could hear Ella now. Serious words, he’d told her. Serious words for a serious nerd, Robbie. You wish! He had laughed with her. But she had turned out to be right, at least in part. He wouldn’t use those words now, she had been right about that, they were too big and too serious, too certain. He couldn’t relate to them, he was too small and broken, into uncertain parts, while those words were the opposite, solid and built up and sure. But he sat here nearly every night, often falling asleep, with or without assistance from blackberry chocolate tannins.

With or without the sliding open of the cupboard door.

Now, he slid the door open as far as it would go.

But he made himself wait for the pleasure of looking properly. Made himself wait till the kettle boiled. Till he poured the water. Dunked his teabag, added milk.

Then he settled back on the lounge to let himself look at them properly. At their precious, rare bodies. Bodies that might have been ruined, if not for his intervention. Bodies that needed love and attention and a place to be where they were safe and cherished. Bodies that gave him purpose and meaning and connected him, in some strange way of grief, to Ella.
Clementine stood all the way to Pennant Hills, but she didn’t mind. The blur of houses, roads, cars, trees, the blackness of the tunnel, the constant thrum of rain; all of it was new and all of it refreshed her, released her. By the time the train doors disgorged her, Clementine felt revived.

She took the stairs two at a time and crossed the concourse to the other side of the station where the pub was. At the corner of the pub warm, unpleasantly musty air blowing out of a ventilator near ground level brought her back to a consciousness of how cold she felt. Maybe this walking wasn’t such a good idea, especially since the rain seemed to be starting up again. But she couldn’t be bothered with a taxi.

Pennant Hills Road was like a moving car-yard or some nightmare from a science fiction story. The traffic zooming past at high speed, the tinted windows and the rain meaning that all drivers were unseen, all the cars moving forward like a herd of surging desert camels … a massive truck honked as it drew level with her, disconnecting her from her imagination. She huddled under the miserable shelter afforded by the overhang of the pub building. Waited for a semi-trailer to thunder through the red light before stepping onto the asphalt and hurrying across the slippery road. One by one the other pedestrians peeled off to waiting cars. Clementine was the only one walking, the only one by herself.

Cresting a short rise, struggling with her umbrella and slipping on the petals smashed into the footpath by the rain and mashed in firmly by other feet before hers, Clementine wished she had rung Emily for a lift. It was wrong to arrive like this, to be a person who had no place or connection here at this time.

And then, the thought of seeing Emily made her feel sick. The idea of a tete-a-tete, just the two of them in the old house. No distractions from each other. Clementine breathed shallowly. Her grip on her umbrella tightened. She stopped. Counting to ten, she forced herself to concentrate on the comforting sound of the rain on her umbrella. She knew what this was. It was anxiety, born of the betrayals in the desert. An anxiety...
she was going to beat. She made herself focus on the greenness of a hedge, on the way a puddle overflowed over the footpath. Looked carefully at the landscape, reassuring herself that here and now she was in a different place. A place where anyone, especially a person who was a lucky dragon, might well find a lucky life.

The landscape was lush. The heavy patchwork of blending greens, the air cushioned with moisture. Sydney-side humidity. It was different in degree to the other humidities she’d known but the feeling of excitement, of freedom that it gave her was the same. She had felt her skin puffing up since she had stepped off the plane, as though the moisture drained from her pores by grief was being replenished. Now she focused on it. Her father would have read something spiritually hopeful into the effect, but Clementine was less sure of seeing positive future meaning revealed by the environment, especially now. Since the night of the storm and the Lazy Susan, she saw much more clearly that Chance and Fate were creatures of caprice whose very nature was to undermine the possibility of control. One roll of the dice the wrong way — specifically, one ill-fated twist of the lazy Susan table-top the wrong way — and there she would have been, a vegetable, or worse. Although, would it be worse to have died? Than to remain a vegetable, like Bart? With no-one to tell the truth to the world about how the accident had happened. She thought quite likely not. She hoped that Bart, in his vegetative state, knew exactly what was going on around him. Remembered exactly how and why he was where he was. And who put him there.

The rain was just a drizzle now.

A car stopped. An old Ford station wagon, about fifteen years vintage. The sort of vehicle a family man might drive. Clementine tried to see the driver through the water running down the window. He was clearly asking if she wanted a lift. Not so young, but not yet definitely middle-aged. A thinnish fellow, brown hair, unremarkable.

He wound the window down. The sort of baby face that anyone would trust. Should she? She glanced heavenward. It looked like thunder and lightning again any second. She was already cold and wet. It would be a good twenty minutes walk. Skirting the national park, the ground was bound to be slippery with mud. Visibility of traffic, too, was likely to be low. But she hesitated. It was one of her mantras, *do not get in cars with strange men*, instilled in her like looking right and left and right again before
crossing the road. She always told everyone, especially women, not to hitchhike. It was the stuff of legend and true life in the Territory, what could happen to a girl (or a boy or even a young man) if they got into a car with a person who turned out to be the wrong one. But this was suburban Sydney and not even a main road or a highway. She wasn’t hitching and it wasn’t dark, or isolated. There was steady stream of vehicles. Surely she was safe here. Surely taking a chance with this man was very low risk.

“I live down in the estate,” said the man, pointing. “Want a lift? I wouldn’t like my wife out in this.” Clementine glanced automatically at his finger. Yes, there was a ring. But then, there was one on her finger too. She found it easier that way. Fewer people tried to find out your story. Anyone could wear a ring.

Thunder crackled and lightning reached out to the tops of nearby trees. The man with the wedding ring looked up at the sky and then at Clementine. He shrugged.

“Um, okay,” she said, shivering, making up her mind. He looked decent. Just a thoughtful husband thinking of his own wife. And if he wasn’t? Well, she was prepared. The car was running on its final set of wheels, by the look of it. No central locking. So he couldn’t lock her in. And in this weather, he couldn’t travel very fast. She could leap out. Were there any bush tracks he could turn onto? But never mind if he did. She knew exactly where Emily lived. If he deviated from the route, she’d just bail out of the car. “Thanks, that’d be great.

“Brett,” said Brett, leaning across to unlock the passenger door and shake her hand. “Just shove your pack in the back seat.”

Clementine ignored him and slid into the front, holding it tightly on her lap. “Clem,” she said, noticing her voice sounded high, unnerved. She closed the door and clicked her seatbelt. “All set,” she said, crinkling her nose at the mouldy smell.

Inside the car, the windows fogged in a few seconds. Brett drove one-handed, slapping at the windscreen futilely and dangerously with his shirtsleeve.

“Just visiting?” he shouted over the creak of windscreen wipers and the rain. She saw a blur of thick braids of liquid unfolding down the windscreen. The wiper on her side hung crookedly down, unmoving, while sheets of water attacked.

“Just visiting,” said Clementine, clutching her umbrella with one hand and the door handle with the other
“Don’t worry about the water,” said Brett. “This car’s seen much worse. Dog gets sick in it all the time.” He cornered without without indicating. “Hard to see, one of the wiper’s broken.” The car lurched left and Clementine felt the almost-skid as they hit a puddle. Houses on either side winked out and then suddenly darkness surrounded them. Brett put his foot down on the accelerator. Clementine gasped. He looked at her sideways. “Blackout,” he said. “Hope it doesn’t affect us. Visiting where?”

Lousy driver and a nosy parker, thought Clementine, her heartbeat racing as a car on the opposite side of the road emerged from the blackness, honking. Was Brett over the centre line? Did he have his lights on? Why had she got in this car? Were there any houses here? All she could make out were huge tall trees crowded at the side of the road like a bunch of aliens.

“Just visiting,” she said, fighting the urge to open the car door and throw herself into the rain. “This corner will do. I’ll get out here.”

Brett turned right and they plunged down the hill. “Too wet,” he said. There were houses on one side of the road now and lights were on. She gripped the door handle. “Hey!” said Brett, without slowing down. “You’re not Emily’s friend, are you?”

Clementine’s mouth opened but no words came out. She kept looking straight ahead, nodded, found her voice. “Yes. How did you know?”

Brett laughed. “My wife Sally tells me the news. Emily wants us to take you to the opening tomorrow.”

Clementine looked over at him. He wasn’t saying any of the clumsy, awful things she was used to hearing now. He simply appeared pleased with himself for guessing who she was. He mustn’t know. Unless he was the world’s best dissembler. Which seemed unlikely.

“That’s ours,” said Brett, pointing across her to a white house set back from the road.

If he didn’t know, it was quite possible that no-one here did. Bless Emily.

The wind slammed a branch the size of a perenti lizard onto the road directly in front of them. Another hunk of wood thunked onto the roof of the car. Brett yanked the wheels up a driveway, onto the nature strip, back down another driveway to the road.

“Or you mine,” said Clementine, not laughing at all. Her heart was thumping so loudly she felt he must hear it over the engine.

Brett pulled into a driveway and honked. “Here we are. Looks like no-one’s home, no car, no lights. I’ll wait a tick to check Em’s remembered to leave the key under the mat,” he said. “We’ve got a spare key at ours, if you ever need it.” He looked at the sky. “Mightn’t be able to walk the dog.” Clementine thought he sounded hopeful about this.

“Thanks very much for the lift,” she said. Why would Emily leave the key under the mat? Maybe she’d been delayed by the weather.

“No worries,” said Brett. “Look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Pick you up five past eight. See you then.”

“Great,” said Clementine, not really listening. And then she was out of the car and running up to the front door, feeling the firm wet pull of her shirt as though it were a new skin, finally believing that maybe this really was a chance for her to start over.

#

Her scrabbling fingers found the key first go, but Brett didn’t reverse out of the driveway until she’d opened the door and flicked the light switch. When the dim light illuminated the hallway she felt as though she’d gone back in time, back to her teenage, early twenties years. She could see herself and Emily, struggling to make no noise as they tumbled into the house late at night, much later than they’d said. The hallstand with its big black umbrella, the shoes lined up next to it, the hallway dark with all the doors closed. Nothing looked to have changed. Emily’s grandmother had always been conscious of a draught but she liked the windows open and could not abide the sound of doors banging.

The first door on the left was the kitchen. The grand oak table, the buttercup yellow tiles. It was exactly as she’d remembered; minus Emily bouncing from her seat with excitement, knocking the vase of gerberas over in her haste to greet Clementine.
She saw a bottle of red wine on the table, a glass sitting next to it. Suddenly, the absence of Emily was overwhelming. Abruptly, Clementine crossed the hall to the lounge room. The bottle-green curtains, partially open, still flowed gracefully to the floor. Clementine closed them and turned on the light. The chandelier sparkled and the room was essentially just as Clementine remembered. She felt her old self tapping on her shoulder.

She went right through the house, her own room the last stop. Clementine felt a familiar frisson of pleasure the moment she stepped in the door. Drawn curtains showcased a riot of banksias and gum trees, some of them now flapping soddenly against the pane. She’d always slept so well here. And woken up so happy, with the kookaburras laughing and the magpies singing. She wouldn’t need to draw the curtains; the trees gave enough shade to stop the morning light from waking you. She poked her head into the en suite. Towels, hand-towel, shampoo and a hairdryer.

She sat on the bed looking out into the rain for a few minutes, consciously relaxing. Starting at the toes, going digit by digit, limb by limb, all the way up her body. She did it every day now. It was something within her control, something she had taken back and made her own. Next, a shower. Clementine stayed under it much longer than she meant to, washing both herself and her undies. Her shower at home had a fail-safe timer; the hot water ran out. She stepped out into the steam and opened the window to disperse it. A pair of bedraggled lorikeets huddled on a branch outside, gazing soulfully.

Clementine felt a pang of homesickness, though for what she wasn’t sure.

Towelling down, she dressed in the clean underwear and shirt she always carried in her pack. Her jeans would have to do as they were. If her luggage still hadn’t turned up tomorrow, she’d borrow some clothes from Emily. She wrung her undies out more firmly and left them hanging on the bathroom rail where they would catch any breeze through the window.

The rain had quietened to a steady drip. Although it was only just past four, Clementine was more than ready for a drink. She went to pour a glass of the red wine sitting invitingly on the kitchen table, and found there was a note sitting under the bottle. “Just in case something unforeseen happens and I can’t be there to greet my oldest friend!” There was a also a rundown of who was who regarding the neighbours, of
‘opening’ happening tomorrow — obviously the event Brett had mentioned — and a directive to eat anything, especially the cheese, olives and chocolates that Emily had remembered were favourites. It was very Emily.

Her phone rang. She saw the number and smiled as she answered. “Perfect timing,” she said, peering out at the nature strip.

“Oh, are you there yet?”

Clementine laughed. “Drinking the very delicious wine you left for me. You’d better hurry up if you want your share!” Clementine could vaguely make out a man sheltering under a liquidambar while a dog peed against its base. “Watching all the suburban action from the kitchen, like your neighbours letting their dog pee on your lawn. They look like a couple, this man and his dog.” She swallowed the sudden lump in her throat, peered into the drizzle again. “Oh lovely, it’s Brett. I hope he brought a doggy bag,” she said, seeing Brett’s head turn toward the dog but hearing Bart reply. Hearing his charming, laughing refusal to pick up doggy-do, no matter where they were: ‘Doggy bags are for Chinese takeaway’ and ‘Real men don’t do that in the desert, sugar.’

“But we’re not in the desert now,” Clementine said softly. “Oh good, he is picking it up.” Brett crouched, poking with a stick, then stood up and gingerly held out the plastic bag in front of him to tie it. He looked around in a furtive fashion, then walked quickly to a rubbish bin a little way along the nature strip.

“What on earth are you on about?” Emily’s voice cut through the static.

“And putting it in the next-door neighbours’ bin,” said Clementine. “Hm.” They both laughed. “Sorry, Em?”

“Dog … just like the owner … Snuffles … .”

Clementine laughed. “They’ll both be snuffling out there, it’s pretty dam wet.” “I’m so sorry my lovely … this storm … means I’ll have to stay the night … possibility, they offered me … Rang Sally … .” It was a bad line.

“You won’t be here tonight?” said Clementine, hearing her voice rise, feeling the quick build of tension up her spine.

“I’m so sorry. … Sally offered to take you … opening tomorrow … ” Emily’s voice distorted.
“Well, I’ll definitely need to go out sometime,” said Clementine. “My luggage didn’t arrive when I did.”

“Get a lift up to the station with Sally and Brett.” The line crackled, making it impossible for Clementine to hear the rest of the sentence.

“Brett already gave me a lift down.” She listened a little longer. The connection was terrible. “Emmy, you’re breaking up,” she said, exaggerating the last two words to get a laugh. But the phone went dead and no amount of redialling could connect her again.

Clementine put the phone on the table. She looked out the window. The rain had stopped and Brett and Snuffles were gone. She put her glass of wine down. She shivered but it wasn’t because she was cold. It was because she was alone, the very place she did not want to be. If Emily was not coming home, she would go out with Benny and her friends. Chinatown at night might make her feel at home. Gulping the wine down, she went to get her umbrella.
CHAPTER TEN
Hunting for the Dragon

Peter sat on his bed, sock feet on the bedspread. It was still early, only about five. He was twitching for it to be night-time. To be the right time to get out there and party with the Friday night crowd. To lose himself, to give himself up to a collective feel-good. The morning had been really unsettling. Being seen as a possible old-lady mugger. He knew how stories could be turned against you. (Margaret!). He’d come straight back here after that. Thought he’d write up some notes, organise some bits and pieces. But he’d been too restless. The adrenalin was still affecting him. He’d had to go out again almost straight away and thrash himself with a few kilometres of swimming at the complex near St Mary’s Cathedral.

He checked his emails again. Still no sign of the one that he was waiting for, bracing himself for, the reason he was here. Not that he was really in a hurry. There were things to do before that email arrived. Strategic things. Things like following his target home. Establishing his bonafides with his new police friend.

But he couldn’t keep his mind on the job. That old lady kept intruding. He’d heard that attacks like that were rife in the city, with the victims often not as fortunate as that old lady. Apparently there were multiple incidents of random violence every week around that area. Just like home, really. He pushed to his feet and paced the room. He needed to change the channel.

He switched on the TV and turned to the news. Flicked onto a cable channel showing a version of a “Most Wanted” program. Those programs always made him slightly queasy. Astonishing how many true stories there were about people who wanted to get rid of other people. Amazing, fantastic, almost unbelievable stories. You couldn’t make them up, they were so sensational; the stuff of horror films. Peter had been amused and faintly repelled when he’d first stumbled across the show with all its terrible, sad, bizarre stories; then intrigued and disbelieving. But since he’d been trapped, energised, whatever by Margaret’s story, he’d been hooked, despite the nausea. And somebody, probably several somebodies, soon would be thanking their lucky stars.
and guardian angels that he had.

Suddenly he couldn’t wait any longer. Time to go. He could watch and wait. Let there be dragons! He was a match for them.

#

Clementine sent a text to Benita as soon as the train pulled out; no turning back now! A night out on the town with the girls. As the train carried her closer to the city, closer to the camaraderie, she stopped feeling tired. More, she realised she was feeling something she hadn’t felt for a long time. She was looking forward to the night. By the time the train disgorged her at Town Hall, even the taste of the underground air seemed to promise something good.

Benita met her at the ticket barrier. “Hey, fabulous you could make it!” she said. “We’re going to have a great night.”

The dusk was crowded with people hurrying, purposeful, blending into the night. Clementine caught the sense of urgency, of anticipation that underlay the sultry air. By the time they reached the Sussex Street, she felt part of the night, open and ready to what it might offer.

Benita squinted at her watch. “The others should be here in five,” she said, raising her voice to be heard above the drums and gongs and screams and cheers.

Standing there in the clanging hurdy-gurdy light of Chinatown, the quickening pulse of the city surrounding her, Clementine felt her breathing deepen, felt her body craving char siu and salt and pepper prawns.

And then came the dragon. The marvellous creature swayed close. The press of bodies forced her near enough to touch its garish mash of rock-hard paper. She stroked her palm along it, remembering the dragons from ceremonies past. Benita grabbed her hand, and then her shirt. Suddenly, as if choreographed, a magnificent burst of lighting cracked the sky open. The dragon’s head was illuminated, but its body stretched out of sight. Oohs and ahhs floated in the air.

“Off with its head!” roared some wag in the crowd. There were jeers and some half-hearted applause. Clementine shivered; she knew it was fanciful but now she saw
menace and danger. In the under-hang of a Chinatown alleyway the dragon seemed more sinister than harmless. Boxed in, arms forced in front of her, she pressed tentatively back to feel if there was wiggle room to gain the outside of the circle. And then came the thunder and the rain, the wind turning fat drops into shards, and the circle scattered, tourists piling into yum cha restaurants and down the alleyways, some sprinting over to Paddy’s Market.

For a few seconds, Clementine was left alone with the dragon. Then it turned its face from her and shimmied into an unmarked doorway.

“Here come the others,” said Benita.

#

The rain was resting just now. Peter walked briskly, and kept his eyes away from other people’s. You never knew. He dodged the groups of ambling teenagers, the workers hurrying homeward, the eyes-straight-ahead-I-am-listening-to-my-own-beat people. The traffic was bumper-to-bumper slick wet chaos. He took few chances, waiting for the lights at every crossing. He felt the lure of the Irish pubs but they would still be there tomorrow. Turning into Dixon Street, he felt an ineffable pleasure. He had been right to say yes to this invitation to Chinatown. He was energised by the clashes of rhythm and noise, and the colours, the colours were magnificent, overwhelming. He felt alive, felt part of something bigger than himself, part of something that was growing, evolving in a primitive way. People were dancing in the streets and Peter joined them, tentative, hardly moving, at first, then letting go a bit, shaking and ooh ooh oohing with the best of them.

Pete felt like it was his night for sure. Hadn’t that old lady said she’d pray for him? And all of a sudden, there she was. His girl, the one he was waiting for.

But someone else was looking at her. A couple of young kids, baseball caps pulled low, one standing strategically in front, the other reaching for the wallet that bulged in her jacket pocket. Peter moved fast. A moment of confusion, some yelling, two boys shoving their way out of the crowd, running. A few seconds of squealing (what other word was there to describe that noise girls made?) and then all the girls were
clustered around Peter. He put his arm around the pretty blonde.

“This is the boy?” said one. “Good on you, Benny. A rescuer.”

Peter laughed. “My pleasure,” he said. “I’m Peter, Peter Smith.”

“Go on,” said the prettiest girl. “You must be pulling our legs.”

“Sounds like a great alias,” said a redhead.

If they only knew.

Then the dragon was upon them.

Up close in Dixon Street, the dragon seemed strangely alive as it arched its back and flickered its tongue, red and yellow scales shimmering, myriad pairs of legs bending and stretching in syncopated rhythm. Peter could feel the bells and the drums and the incense working together to make the crowd feel part of the story, to make them realise this was their story. That this dragon was showing them something, was making them part of a fresh way of seeing.

“BBQ King, next stop!” said the redhead.

“Can’t wait,” said Peter.

#

The Cantonese phrases drifted past Clementine like parts of an unsolved puzzle. The stimulation of the sights, the sounds, the smells all melding was an overwhelming whirl and welter of confusion. It was like something from her past but not quite as she had known it. The subtle shift in tones of smells, colours, languages, the not-exactly familiar, made her uneasy, disconnected, fraught. She knew something of the fear she’d felt the time she’d been on the giant merry-go-round in Canberra when she was a child. They had visited Canberra on holiday. Her mother had wanted to see Parliament House and the High Court. And the artificial lake. Her mother had approved of Lake Burley Griffin. So ordered and contained, so unlike the ocean. They saw Phar Lap’s heart, and the Observatory, that curious spherical building that looked like the egg of some science fiction creature pushing up from the earth. And then her parents had taken her to ride on the historic merry-go-round as a treat. But it had been so crowded and noisy with garish colour and children’s shrieks that she had been frightened before the ride even began.
Her father had lifted her carefully onto a painted red horse. He had taken his time settling her, a mistake as it had turned out, because then he had to mount a steed some three or four away from her own. Used to smaller animals, animals that moved, that smelt and whose skins and fur and softness yielded to her own, Clementine had found the painted horses somehow ghastly and terrifying. All around her, everything had whirled past so fast that she couldn’t make out her mother’s face, could hardly distinguish her by her clothing. She felt completely lost. And no matter how high her horse leapt, she couldn’t catch up to her father. She had begun screaming, her voice lost amongst the cheers and hurrahs of the other, older, children. By the time the ride ended she was incoherent with fear. She remembered lying on some concrete, sobbing, as clearly as if it were yesterday. Her father talking about the animals they could see in the clouds, a favourite game of theirs. Eventually she had looked up to the sky and there had been a cloud in the shape of a dragon, generous puffs of steam coming from its nose. She had stopped crying instantly. When she had moved to the Territory, she had seen an abundance of those fluffy white clouds, always on the horizon, beckoning you forward.

She looked up at the sky now. Seeking a sign. There were clouds but they were grey and she couldn’t see any animals.

Somebody was shouting something about a barbeque king, then Benita linked her arm through Clementine’s. “How’re you holding up?” she yelled. “Climate change got you yet?”

If only that was all it was. Obediently, she walked with the group up the mall. Maybe food could save the evening for her, ground her, reconnect her to the here and now.
He rubbed his eyes. Peered at his watch. After five. Craning his neck, he saw it was pelting down. Harder than when he’d driven home, if that were possible. The speech, what on earth was he going to say, what could he possibly say. He heard footsteps above, a pause. Then a clang and clatter down the stairs. “Dad?”

“In here,” said Robbie, leaping off the lounge to slide the door to the wardrobe closed. Was it possible to feel tireder now than before his nap?

Hugh came in carrying the parrot in his cage. Riki Tiki poked his head around the door and whined.

“Out!” said Robbie to the dog.

“Hello Dad, how was your day too?” Hugh banged the cage down on the floor, scowled at his father. “He’s cranky, wants to get out of the cage, but I can’t be having nerdy-bird footprints in my painting.”

Hugh put his hands on his hips. “You look like you’re shot, Dad. Or need one. I’m sure Raver’ll help you out. I’ve got to get some work done before Katie comes round.” He stomped back upstairs.

Robbie opened the cage door and Raver hopped out and pecked at the box that held his treats. Robbie took the lid off the box and let the bird help himself. He looked longingly at the desk drawer where he kept some of her precious stories but he didn’t open it. We can play later! Let me help you with your speech. Picking up his notepad from the couch, he sat down to write. “Sweet treat, favour Raver,” crooned the parrot.

At six o’clock, hopeful that he’d put together an outline that would hold up under later scrutiny, he opened the study door, patted the dog (waiting not so much faithfully now as with an eye on dinner) and walked upstairs, parrot on his shoulder. Before he headed to the kitchen, Robbie knocked on the door of Hugh’s studio. This room used to be the lounge room, but that had changed recently, with Hugh’s acceptance into art school signifying his right to a studio, and no other room in the house being suitable and available. Robbie was very confident that Ella would want it this way.
He knocked. “Dinner?”

“Katie’s coming round. She’s bringing pizza.” Hugh opened the door a crack.

“That’d be great,” said Robbie. “What sort?”

There was a second’s silence. “Oh — one meat lovers, one vegetarian.”

Robbie realised that he wasn’t being invited to eat dinner, but to buy it. “I’m happy to pay. Do you want to get more, if it’s for three?”

“Nah, Katie doesn’t eat much. Anyway, I’ve just got a bit to finish before she arrives.” Abruptly, the door shut in Robbie’s face.

#

Back in the kitchen, he opened a bottle of red, poured himself a glass and took a swig. Riki Tiki watched with interest, then stiffened and barked loudly, skidding into the hall. The doorbell rang and Raver flapped and whistled and Robbie’s spirits lifted slightly. The pizza was arriving just in time to stop him getting sloshed and maudlin.

But when he opened the door, wind driven rain and wet retriever hit him at knee level.

“Just passing, thought I’d drop in,” Brett was hunched up against the wind, and trying, ineffectually, to shelter under the narrow porch roof. “Sally told me about what happened to Posie. Sounds like a lucky escape.” Snuffles woofed and launched himself at Riki Tiki and Robbie stepped back into the hallway, out of range of dogs and rain.

“You’d better come in,” he said to Brett, resigned again. Who walked the dog in this weather? *We need a drawbridge!*

They went to the kitchen and Robbie automatically gave Brett a beer, cut him a wad of cheese. Got the olives from the fridge, a packet of savoury biscuits from the cupboard. Turned on the television.

“Want another animal?” said Brett, jerking his head at Snuffles.

Robbie thought of the collection in his study. Could you count animals that had been ministered to by taxidermists?

“I’ve enough already, thanks,” said Robbie, as Mr Happy, who had left his station on Lily’s bed to pad upstairs in the hope of dinner, hissed and arched at Snuffles,
who tried to hide under the kitchen table.

Brett was settling in, hacking off a sizable portion of cheese, fiddling with the remote. “Not good for my gut but hey. Glad you were home, would’ve got completely soaked otherwise,” he said, mouth full.

“Good to see you,” lied Robbie. “Just came up for a quick drink before getting down to the final tweaking.” Hopefully even Brett could pick up that hint.

“Anything I can do?” Brett paused with the twiddling, pathetically eager, Robbie thought, to be included. “Oh, and by the way, Sally said we can take Posie in tomorrow.”

“That would be a big help. If you could do that, I’d be very grateful,” said Robbie.

“Absolutely, we’d be more than happy, love to,” said Brett, nodding, looking serious. He made a sound, looked as though he wanted to say something else but couldn’t find the right words. Annoyingly, he began to tap his fingers on the table. Robbie decided to ask Brett to leave after the one beer.

“Ten years today,” Brett said, staring into his glass. “Seems like no time at all.”

For a heart-stopping second, Robbie thought Brett was talking about Ella, that Brett was, outrageously, in his over-friendly clumsy way attempting to empathise; but then he realised. It had been a year of unbelievable yawning horror for both of them, that year.

“Seems like yesterday,” said Robbie. The eyes of both men went to the photo of Ella and Lily, of Sally and Braedon, taken in the backyard when the babies were both newborns, both future heralds of promise and hope, not reminders of the lost idyll. All these years, and it still hung where Ella had first hung it, in the kitchen. Where we can see it all the time, it’s such a lovely one of Lily and Braedon, she had said. It was a lovely one of her, too. But then, Robbie had never known her to take a bad photo. She was smiling her usual Mona Lisa smile, and she looked totally mysterious and completely natural and full of life, just as she was, just as she still might be, just as he wanted to remember her. Robbie knew that he would never take the photo down.

Brett gulped down the Cascade, fumbled some olives into his mouth. Robbie hoped he wouldn’t cry. He wanted to keep his energy for cane toads.
“Another beer? Wine?” Robbie poured a glass and handed it to Brett. Now Robbie felt helpless, it would be too mean to throw Brett out, to plead the pseudo-false excuse of urgent work. It was so easy to forget that other people, especially Brett, had serious grief too. How did Brett cope usually? Well, he clearly didn’t, that was obvious from the way his career had fallen apart. Even with Sally to share it all with. Although Robbie thought Brett might not have made the career-thing work anyway, Brett was the kind of person you could have told wouldn’t quite succeed, he had always had too much of a desire to please, too much dog and not enough tiger.

Ella would have remembered the anniversary. She would have known what to say, she probably would have sent a card. Not bumbled like Robbie. She would have been graceful, sympathetic, available. Not fragmented, part of her attention on an introductory lecture about cane toads that had to be given the next day.

Brett drank the wine like it was a cool drink needed after a workout, and looked round for more. Robbie knew the feeling. He pushed the bottle over. Brett clutched it. He looked like he was pouting. A prelude to tears? Oh dear God, please no. “What — where’s Sally, I mean, what’s she doing?” said Robbie. He had to say something, anything to stop a teary interlude. And this was something he genuinely wanted to know. Sal had been his friend, as well as Ella’s. She had introduced them.

“Going out with Tanya, or having her over. Girls night,” said Brett, looking again at the photo. “Might just have one more glass with the news and then I’ll have to be off.” He filled up his glass. Robbie turned the volume up.

The newsreader looked gravely into the camera. “A gruesome discovery is made by a young couple ….” Robbie poured a second glass of wine. “A young couple out bushwalking earlier today discovered … The remains of a body in a cave … some years … location in bushland off the beaten track …”. The newsreader went onto remind viewers of other bodies found in bushland over the years, an aerial shot tracking over a vast tract of forest showing how easy it would be to hide bodies in such a landscape. “There is speculation that this may be work of a serial killer.” The camera panned up for one more close-up of the bush.

“Looks like the view from our balcony,” said Brett.

“Could be anywhere in Sydney,” said Robbie. “Probably a file picture.”
The banksia tree outside the kitchen window thumped the glass and Brett spilled some wine. “Yikes!” he said, laughing nervously, wiping wine from the table with his sleeve. “Creature from the black lagoon.”

Two thumps against the front door set both dogs barking and both men tensed.

“Probably a tree branch,” said Brett. “One nearly got me on the way down from the station this afternoon.”

“The pizza!” said Robbie, moving quickly to the hall and flinging the door open.

#

A figure encased in a sopping anorak toppled into the hallway. The wind slammed the door after her. “Thanks, Mr Ravell. I’ve been shouting and knocking for ages.”

Hugh appeared. “Why didn’t you just text me?”

Katie said nothing, shrugged off the wet anorak. Robbie took the two large pizza boxes from her and went into the kitchen. Brett sat at the table, looking hopeful.

Katie glared at Hugh. “You try just texting in freezing wind and pouring rain with two boxes of pizza, okay.”

“Okay, okay. Here, are you wet? Jeez, look at that water.”

Robbie heard the door to the linen cupboard slide open, and the dull sound of something, a towel, maybe a bathmat, hitting the floor. Next, the sound of somebody rubbing something against the floorboards. “Over there, Hugh, you missed that bit.”

“Whatever. I’ll leave the towel down.”

“Trapped,” said Brett, not unhappily, looking out to where the banksia was thrashing it out now with a couple of wattle trees. “If it’s still like this in half an hour, I’ll have to give Sal a call. She can pick me up before her night gets properly started. Only fair, she wanted me to walk the dog, after all.”

Katie and Hugh came into the kitchen together, Hugh’s arm around the girl. Hugh coughed significantly, glared at his father. “Right!” said Robbie, pulling out his wallet. “What’s the damage?”

Hugh slid into a chair facing the window and opened the pizza box lids. He
looked at Brett, then at Robbie. “Thirty four,” he said, then: “There’s enough, if you want some,” picking up a slice.

Katie was over at the bench, clattering crockery and plates. She moved Robbie’s posters aside and one of them unfurled. She gave a little scream. “Erk, what’s that?”

“That,” said Hugh, speaking through a mouthful of meat lovers, “would be a cane toad. Dad’s pets. He’s got a pond-ful of them outside.”

“Really?” said Katie. “Oh, very funny.” But she frowned at the picture.

“As if anyone would keep them as a pet,” said Hugh scornfully.

“But I’ve seen them before,” said Katie. “You used to have some in your frog pond, didn’t you?” She looked at Brett.

Brett paused with pizza halfway to his mouth, wiping some crumbs from his jeans to the floor. “Me? No way, darling.”

“But I saw them,” Katie insisted. “Years and years ago. Tanya was visiting Sally and they told me to go outside and play and not to go near the pond. So of course, that was where I went. And there were these” – she pointed – “horrible ugly monsters, I had nightmares about them for ages after.”

Brett swallowed, shook his head. “Wouldn’t have been those.” He tugged nervously at his hair. “Can’t think what . . . Our frog pond was strictly for frogs. And the odd goldfish, before the kookas got ‘em. No cane toads.” He waved his hands for emphasis and something drifted to the floor.

“You’ve pulled out some of your hair,” observed Hugh, with interest. He tugged at his own. Nothing happened. “Must be something to do with getting old.”

“They looked just like them.” Katie didn’t sound convinced.

Brett wiped his mouth, glanced out the window. “You must be getting confused.” He rose from the table and Snuffles licked away the crumbs that fell from his trousers. “Maybe a pobblebonk frog found it’s way in. They look a bit like a toad. Might make a run for it while we can, eh, fella.”

Robbie scraped back his chair and gladly led the way to the door.

“We’ll give Posie a ring, put it right out of your head,” said Brett. He saw Robbie’s puzzled look. “Tomorrow. The opening.”

“Oh, right, thanks,” said Robbie. “See you there.” He watched through the
drizzle as Brett drooped off down the path, Snuffles muddying his trousers.

#

“Have a good night, you two. I’m off to finish my speech.” Robbie grabbed another slice of pizza and the wine and left Hugh and Katie to it. Safe in his study again, he closed the door firmly behind him. Flicked the switches on the three lamps. One of them sparked and went out, but the other two shone out valiantly, bringing dusty bases into sharp relief. The phone rang and he jumped. Lucky he wasn’t holding the wine. Should he answer? It might be Lily. Or Posie. Or Tanya. Or somebody else he’d forgotten to call back. He picked up the receiver.

“Robbie, it’s Sally.”

Sals. “If it’s Brett, he’s just left, Sals. He’ll be home in ten.” Robbie took a deep breath.

“Oh, thank you, but I’m not ringing about Brett. I’m ringing to see if there’s anything else Tanya or me can do for you tomorrow. And to tell you not to worry.”

“That’s very kind of you. Especially because,” he stumbled. “Brett was just saying, you know.” Stumbling on, “Do you, are you okay? Today, I mean? Do you want to talk?” After a few minutes, Robbie hung up, feeling better, more optimistic about the world. Sally almost always had that effect on him, even now, even when his feelings about her were sometimes more complicated than he’d like.

He stood in the middle of the room, eyes closed, breathing trying to put himself into the zone. This lecture. Try and clear the cobwebs … Maybe if he started off like that. He lay on the floor.

Yes, very good. He stretched, staring at the ceiling. No shortage of cobwebs in those corners. Rolling his neck from side to side you need to move more! If it wasn’t dark he’d have a host to choose from in the garden too, to contemplate from where he was, if he sat up. In fact, why not look anyway, with the torch? The garden was full of them; St Andrews Cross spiders took over the agapanthus every spring, funnel-webs sprang up after rain, red-backs summered and wintered under the decaying outdoor furniture. Daddy-long-legs and huntsmen infested the garage. There were clusters of webs on the side mirrors of his car. At some stage, nearly every sort of spider had been
discovered indoors, too; but with a cat, a dog and an African Grey all on the watch, Robbie had never been seriously worried about them taking over too much of the house.

Torch still at the forefront of his mind, Robbie rolled up to a sitting position, slid open the nearest cupboard door and peered in. He jumped back involuntarily when he looked into the beady eye of a Paradise Parrot. All fluffed up on a perch in the cupboard and no place to go. Well, more accurate to say there were no more parrots to go places. Ella had drawn a beautiful picture of the Paradise Parrot, given it the, perhaps slightly predictable legend, Paradise Lost. He could see her, in her pink and yellow paisley house coat, still hanging in their wardrobe. He could see her filling out its form, the shifting comfort of her shape as she lifted her hair from the collar, tucked the belt in and around her waist. He could see her stroking Raver with one hand, while with the other she drank a cup of tea or a glass of wine while she drew.

The room filled up with Ella and his grief. *The two shall become one*. In his mind, in his sensory life, in his everyday, her artefacts and the creatures behind the sliding doors were expressions of the same thing. Ella was ever and always the only true heroine of his authentic story and so everything related to her. Everything had meaning, purpose, happened for a reason connected to her.

But with this tenth anniversary looming, he knew the time was coming soon that he would have to face literal boxes in the proverbial attic, not only his but hers.

But where was he, spiders. Yes, spiders. He was sure there were more of them in the agapanthus than ever before. It must mean something. Perhaps his nightmares were being realised, the same devastation that had overtaken Guam was being replicated here, now, with an innocuous looking unseen-unheard party — in Guam’s case, the bird-eating tree snake, incorrectly identified by a bird expert as a rat-eating snake, bye bye birdies! — eating up natives who would usually eat spiders. Robbie screwed up his face. A garden full of snakes and spiders; some other naturalist’s delight. Though a good image, or even a good opening chapter for a book. *In the beginning was the garden ... The lost birds of Guam.*

He tensed as branches quivering with living flora scraped down the glass in the wind. Walking over to the French doors, he twisted his fingers into the blinds, parting them, hoping to see the silvery light that heralded the night. But there were too many
clouds to see anything more than the rain directly in front of him and the looming silhouette of the national park bushland in the near distance. Lots of spiders in there, snakes too. But no cane toads, at least not yet; at least he hoped not.

This speech … he sat down again, this time at the desk, and took a black felt-tipped pen. Now he was in business. He placed the outline points on the desk, drew the paper pad toward him, jotted down a couple of extra ideas. Really, he just had to keep his mind on predation and extinction, on how things were there one day and then vanished the next. Missing, presumed dead. But sometimes, after years and years, or even for years and years, there would be sightings. You couldn’t always prove extinction straight away. You could only say that the probability was very high. There was always hope.

It would all be so much easier if he were dealing with the passenger pigeon. But of course nobody had believed the naysayers then; or nobody who could stop it happening. The advantage of focusing on a cane toad and the damage it could do was that its very horror might galvanise some sort of action, some sort of philanthropy or grassroots action that could save. Robbie took a bite of pizza, a swallow of wine and concentrated on his speech.

#

The Chinese restaurant looked nothing on the outside but it was packed. Peter let the girls go first up narrow stairs to a dining room where somehow a table for six materialised.

“Great food here,” shouted one of the girls. “Early morning hours, it’s a who’s who of Sydney chefs.”

Peter smiled and nodded, hoping his raised eyebrows signified engagement.

He felt Benita tap him on the arm.

“Intros,” she said, pointing as she said their names. “Sophie, Katrina, that’s Al, Emma’s in the loo, and Clementine.”

Peter nodded and smiled. Emma was the prettiest and Katrina ran her a close second. But the others were all lookers too, in their own ways. All of them looked
pretty fit, like they worked at it; but none of them were too thin. Benita had great hair, a natural blonde, and she wore it out and flowing. Sophie’s curls were a riot; she looked like a lot of fun. Al was the elfin redhead, she looked quiet but he’d been wrong about those types before. Clementine reminded him a little of girls he’d seen in Spain, with something of the twenties flapper about them; her dark hair hung with perfect symmetry around her face.

The waiter came and they all shouted their orders. Peter went for the BBQ pork, char siu they called it. If this place was as authentic as they said it would be damned good.

When the food came, Peter waited a second, politely, ladies first. Even though the pork was calling him, loudly.

“Better watch your manners, matey, we’re all cops,” said Sophie, forking up a particularly succulent piece that Peter had his eye on. “Hope you haven’t overstayed your visa.”

“Definitely not,” said Peter. All cops? Serendipity, zeitgeist, synchronicity. Cop magnet. What will be will be. Que sera sera, as Margaret would have said. What an opportunity. “I used to be with the police myself, but I got out to follow my dream,” he said, chopsticking a prawn. Believable, if not entirely true. People left the police every day, disillusioned by the job, worn down by the politics, wondering if there was still time to have another sort of life. Truer that he got out to follow a nightmare, but no need to disclose that. Yet.

He was careful to edit in the way most likely to impress them. Potted biog, war stories, names of a few different countries, a few different news events. Grand finale of his raison d’etre for being in Australia. He embellished only slightly. Always better to tell as much of the truth and as few lies as possible, things got less complicated that way.

“So, what, you stand in Hyde Park under the gum trees waiting to see if anyone spots you’re not a koala?”

“It’s fig trees in Hyde Park, you ignoramus. Waiting to see if anyone notices he’s not wearing a fig leaf.”

“Looks like a Bonds boy to me — oh no, hang on, he’s — which accent is that?”

“Scots,” said Peter. “Or Irish, at a pinch.”
“Scottish, he’s a kilt wearer. And you know what they say a Scotsman wears under his kilt,” said Benita, nodding significantly.

All the girls laughed.

#

The green tea was oolong. Unconsciously, Clem tapped her fingers on the table. The waiter spoke quickly, the sound familiar, and she responded automatically. He nodded and gave her a quick smile, a probing glance, probably looking to see if she’d Asian heritage. Her few words of spoken Cantonese were all useful ones, and when she’d been in Hong Kong she’d nearly worn them out. Very good; please, thanks, more, toilet, how much. Her Mandarin vocabulary was slightly more advanced, she could count and comment on the weather, ask for duck and chicken’s feet in aniseed and request not too spicy. But both were rusty with disuse. It must have been the authenticity of this place that had made her speak the language.

She drank a glass of wine, absently, seeing herself drink it as though she were acting a part. She ate the prawns whole, crunching the shells, enjoying the familiarity of them. BBQ meat was tasty, but ever since she’d put a foot on Sydney soil she’d craved seafood. Must be something to do with eschewing it for so long, after years of thoughtlessly demolishing mountains of it as her right. In Coober Pedy, she’d always felt they were too far from the sea and frozen prawns didn’t have the same appeal.

Clementine hardly noticed the conversation. She was too far away in her own head.

“Well, some of us have to get back to our beauties for our sleeps.” The food was pretty much gone when Emma stood up, arm in arm with Ali, and they made their goodbyes.

Peter stared after them, bemused. You never could tell.

“Let’s kick on to The Rocks for a few more drinks.” Benita sounded keen.

“Somewhere where we can see some of our best clients, you mean,” said Sophie.

“Why not,” said Benita “It’s Friday!”

The others pulled out but Clementine stayed, even when she saw it was just her,
Benita and Peter. She wanted to delay the moment where she would have to go home alone, back to Emily’s empty house. And she didn’t get the vibe that her friend wanted to be alone with the boy. Everyone else was pulling out, except Benita’s new boy.

They walked down to the Rocks together, Benita and the boy chatting animatedly, Clementine content to be third wheel and watch the sights and sounds of Sydney flowing past. From the casually understated groovy edginess of Chinatown, through to the harsher, sophisticated dressing displayed on George Street to the explosion of tourist colours, local suits and expensive casuals on show in the Rocks Clementine felt the city embracing her, absorbing her, settling her. She sat in the pub Benita directed them to and drank while she listened to her friend talk and flirt and watched the traffic, the wheeled and the befooted, cruise past. She was content, sitting, drinking slowly, feeling the night fold her into better shape. She could tell her friend really, really liked this new man.

Peter was extremely pleased with the way things were going. Benny was exactly his type. She was funny, a looker, quick and genuine. He didn’t keep track of the time or the drinks and was surprised to realise it was late when they spilled out onto the pavement and started walking round the Quay.

“What’re you going all the way out there again for, Clem?” said Benita. “Come back to mine. We’ll be there in two ticks and I’ll drive you over in the morning. No traffic Saturday, it’ll take no time. Or better still, ring and cancel,” said her friend. “Go from my place, if you want to go to the shindig. S’what I’d do.” She turned to Peter. “So, are you enjoying Sydney?”

“Hm. Not so much when it’s pouring with rain and I’m pretending to be having a jolly time pulling rabbits out of hats.” They all laughed. “But this is pretty near perfect.” He didn’t want this evening to end. For the first time in months he was relaxed. He’d only checked his phone twice the whole evening. But he couldn’t stop looking at all the lights winking across the Harbour. Somewhere out there, further than any of the lights he could see, was his quarry.

Then Benita was asking Clementine to stay the night again. He decided to chance it.

“Sounds like a good offer,” said Peter. “I’ve got to find somewhere new to doss
down myself. It’s getting a bit exxy and a bit lonesome on my ownsome. ” He smiled, putting it out there, looking out over the Harbour once he’d said it.

“Three really would be a crowd in my humble home,” said Benita. “But maybe we can get together some time soon?”

“I’d like that,” said Peter. He hadn’t expected to go home with her tonight, but he really felt it between them. Quite apart from her being a cop and him wanting to get friendly with one. He handed her one of the cards he’d had printed just in case he needed to do business any conventional way. Name, occupation “researcher” and phone number, no company. Though she’d pretty much automatically accepted him, once he’d said he was with the job, or used to be. How much due diligence was she likely to do apart from that? “Don’t be a stranger.”
CHAPTER TWELVE

In The Museum

Robbie drove into the Museum early on Saturday. Could it really have been ten years? The sky was blue, the clouds were small cottonwool creatures herding together, led by a gentle breeze. It was a fine day to be out in Hyde Park.

And a fine day to be inside the Museum.

Nobody else was in the Spirit House today. No other living body, anyway. Just how he liked it.

“A popular misconception of a museum is of a place which has a dusty pall hanging over all the musty objects it has collected over the years. This is a young museum — as museums go — so, although we cannot always claim to be the repository of curiosities from hundreds of years ago, we have the good fortune not to be too dusty.”

Polite laughter from the audience. Robbie observed the gentle curve of an albatross beak. So distinctive.

“The public face of our museum — as of every museum — is our exhibitions, and everything about this exhibition has been designed with the public, the people who will visit it, in mind.” Pause, for people to digest. “I’d like to dedicate the opening of this exhibition, Cane Toad on the Main Road: A Superhighway to Extinction, to my wife, Eleanora. Although she can’t be with us today, I know she is here in spirit. So – raise your glasses with me. To Eleanora.” Ten years, Robbie.

“To Eleanora.” Robbie imagined some of his colleagues, the ones who hardly knew him at all, craning their heads at mention of his mystery wife. With the passage of time, fiction was likely to fill in the blanks left by unknown facts.

He sat in the Spirit House for some time. He knew Ella was with him. She would make sure everything was okay.

#

Posie woke earlier than usual Saturday morning, which was just as well, for she
had certainly not been up to any baking or organising last night. But now she felt fit as several fiddles, as her father would have said, and ready to cook up enough to feed an army, her father’s phrase again. She did so love the organisational flurry of preparing and cooking quantities of goodies. Perhaps it came from being the youngest in a large family, though it hadn’t seemed an especially large family for the times, certainly several of her classmates had come from similarly sized tribes; a respectable number of children anyway, more than the average. Because the mouths were already all there to be fed and watered, clothed and sheltered by the time she arrived, she was used, from her position as the youngest, to seeing abundance in the home, whether of furniture or people or animals or food. The kitchen of her childhood always held the promise of an ensuing feast, the makings of which would naturally be provided by the women of the house, and in that luscious kitchen she had known much fulfilment of that promise. Until Posie was sent away to boarding school at thirteen (which she hated, apart from meeting Minerva those years were the worst of her life), her mother’s kitchen in her childhood home was the site of many happy times for her; after she was banished (during term time), that kitchen took on majestic qualities and the girl-Posie determined, without ever consciously voicing the fact, that she would have such a kitchen full of kept promises when she grew up. Fortunately, she loved to cook, all manner of things. Which was extra lucky, given that Minerva did not enjoy cooking and Posie did not, in general, enjoy eating things that Minnie cooked. So, even though the kitchen was quite splendid in its dimensions — eat-in, in real estate parlance — Posie usually had it all to herself; the bits that she wanted, anyway. Minnie would quite happily seat herself at the table as a taster or a listener while foodstuffs were prepared, and on occasion, when pressed for time, Posie had cajoled her friend into service as a grater or a cutter or a butterer of tins and pans. This was one of those occasions.

“Of course, it would have been far better to have had this all done last night,” said Posie, shaping scone dough. “But I simply did not feel capable. Not after the day I had.”

Minnie, rubbing a butter wrapper onto a non-stick tray, made a mm noise and then said. “Robbie rang last night while you were sleeping. He seemed very concerned about a gun that you apparently told him you had taken into town with you.” Her large
blue eyes stared guilelessly at Posie’s own.

“Goodness!” said Posie. “I was quite flustered, at the time.”

“I told him you liked to imagine things, sometimes. To make yourself think that the world was a much nicer place than it is,” said Minerva.

Posie frowned. “I’m not sure how my saying I’d a gun fits in with that, dear. And I don’t want him thinking I’m senile.”

Minerva inspected the corners of the pan. “He seemed to think it made sense. He stopped asking about the gun, anyway. After I told him I was sure that he really didn’t need to worry. As if she would really take a gun to town, is what I actually said. And anyway, I pointed out that the only guns we had in the house were half a century old.” She looked at Posie and smiled grimly. “I’m sure Robbie has no idea that those old pistols get a regular workout.”

“Oh, that is a relief,” said Posie, kneading pastry now for sausage rolls. “He has so many other things on his mind, poor man. Running a household requires constant attention. And he has his important job as well, of course.” She studied her handiwork disconsolately. “I have never had my mother’s light hand for pastry. Some things are simply a gift.”

Her mother had wanted to call her Iris; a name her father had allegedly abhorred, though nobody ever knew why. Perhaps he had known an Iris he disliked. There had been an Aunty Iris somewhere on her mother’s side, but Posie had never known if her father had even met this aunt. Posie did not particularly like the name herself; it suggested another type of person, a person quite directed about her life, a person who fixed a beady eye on an aim and pursued it; a person who got things done; a very un-Posie like being. Apparently her father had said that if her mother insisted on another flowery name for their sixth daughter, the name would be Posie, (not Primrose? Her mother had begged. Absolutely not; Posie was glad he had put his foot down there), but gave no reason for his insistence. Posie thought this apocryphal story very likely, given her father’s personality; the only wonder was that he had consented to her mother’s naming rights to all her sisters. But he was an old-fashioned man, and may have well believed that naming daughters was a woman’s right. With a Rose, Violet, Flora, Olive and a Lillian already in the family, all named for relatives, dead and living, Posie stood
out as the only original, and the only girl, named by her father. Her brother had been
Charles (and never Charlie), after her father, who was Hugh Charles; a fine, manly name
then, somewhat out of fashion now. Posie had clear, snap-shotted memories of her
brother, though whether they were real memories of things that had happened or
memories created in reference to the few photos that she had, she wasn’t sure. He had
died during WW2, fighting in a jungle. She didn’t like to think of it, even now, poor
Charles; he had seemed so grown up to her, but what a young boy he had been in reality!
She did, however, remember her father’s reaction to the death of his only son. Her
father had taken to the bottle, as they said in hushed whispers, and taken himself
somewhere far away from the family. Not literally, of course not literally, her father’s
sense of duty had been far too entrenched for that, but in his mind and in his day-to-day
life. This departure had lasted for some years.

Her father had been fifty when Posie was born, and her mother nearly forty-five.
Her closest sibling was fifteen years older. She had been a miracle baby; the miracle no-
one really looked for, but when she arrived they were happy enough to have her. She
suspected that, in a way, she had brought the family together. She had never spoken to
Olive since her parents’ accident; when Violet and Lillian died (they were her closest
sisters, the ones to whom she felt a real family tie), she felt that her real family was all
gone. Violet had never married (both Violet and Olive had been engaged, but both their
fiancées had met similar fates to Charles) so there were no children; but Lillian had
married quite late in life; and promptly produced Eleanora. Posie herself had been thirty
when Eleanora arrived, and, having suffered what her mother had called a ‘serious
romantic disappointment’, she had moved in with Lillian to recover and also, though no-
one admitted it openly, to help her sister, who suffered from the after-effects of polio,
and whose husband was not useful. Posie adored her sister, and she had promptly fallen
in love with her miracle niece, the baby that, like herself, should never have been; and
how fortunate for them both that she had. For within five years her parents would die in
that terrible accident, resulting in the rift between Violet and Lillian and Posie and the
other sisters. And her fiancée, the man who promised so much — rescue from a life of
spinsterhood, the possibility of her own family — would fall to his death on an innocent
Sunday bushwalk. It had been a large church party, and there was much confusion, both
at the time and later, as to what exactly had happened. Posie sometimes (though not at
the time, at the time she had been dazed with sorrow) considered his passing a blessing
in disguise. At the funeral, there had been a young lady (much younger than Posie, a
girl of no more than twenty) whose copious tears and general uncontained grief
occasioned some to mistake her for the bereaved fiancée! Posie had not met her, had not
wanted to meet her; but she remembered her. And the daffodils she cradled so
incongruously, like a baby. A sheaf of daffodils at the funeral of another woman’s beau!
The image burnt itself into her retinas. Posie had never liked daffodils anyway, she had
been, perhaps still was, just slightly superstitious. She had never been keen on them
because of what they represented in flower lore, the association with lost love and
sorrow. Not to mention a few other unpleasant things. They were the only flower
unwelcome in her garden, the only flower that she unequivocally knew she would never
wait and watch for, coaxing it to push its way out of the soil into the clear light of day.
But they were everywhere else, many people found them to be very attractive. The
cheerfulness of yellow, she supposed. Grace had been a case in point, she had had beds
of them, and encouraged other neighbours to grow them too. Ella had taken some,
laughing off Posie’s objections. Not that Posie had ever explained exactly why she
hated them so. Sally and Tanya planted them, too. Not to mention the neighbours
around the block, several of them. Some days when Posie was feeling down it seemed
that wherever she looked there were daffodils now. She wiped her hands on her apron.
It was nearly time to be dressing.

Posie had refused Brett’s offer of a lift in to the Museum, when he had rung. “It
is meant to be such a lovely day, after all the rain we have had. We will take Lily on the
train,” she said. “But — I’m forgetting the picnic basket. Oh dear.” She heard Sally’s
voice in the background, then she came on the line.

“What, Posie, Tanya and I will come in on the train with you,” said Sally. “And Hugh
and Katie, too. Brett will bring Emily’s friend later.”

Dear Sally, how thoughtful of her to not want Robbie to worry. And how good
of her to include Emily’s friend. But then, Sally had always been thoughtful, from a
child. Though most peculiar and attention-seeking in some ways, she had an unusual
understanding of others and always seemed to know what was going on around her. And
she was —had been— so close to Ella. So distressed, as they all were.

Posie dressed in her powder blue suit, conscious of the occasion. Blue was her favourite, she knew it favoured her, and she had favoured it, from a small child. Her sisters had all been pink and purple girls but she had always wanted blue, and her father, if not her mother, had been happy to oblige. She could see now that poor Daddy had been constrained by the frills and femininities of such a female household, six daughters, poor man, although he never complained. Posie had found out later that he had started trust funds for their weddings the day each of them was born. Hers had come to her (unmarried) on his death, the interest from the squirrelled monies having spiralled the whole into a ludicrous amount.

She took out the gold locket her father had given her when she turned twenty-one. This was an occasion that merited the wearing of it. Clasping it, stroking the smooth roundness of its heart-shaped surface, she could see his pleasure in the gift, all those years ago, as though it were yesterday. Back then, she had been anxious and insecure, apprehensive of the future of an inconceivable married life, but determined to achieve it. She thought, now, how lucky it was that she had not married and had her own family. For if she had, what would have happened to Eleanora? And, more recently, to Hugh and Lily? And even Robbie, who, although he held a very responsible position and was very clever was not very practical and was a terrible cook. Children simply didn’t eat healthy food (or the other kind, either, though that was not so important) if you didn’t cook well and cook the things they liked. Come to that, Posie herself hungered only for the things that she considered treats; luckily in her case, this meant roast dinners and juicy ripe fruits and crisp salads of celery curls and carrot shavings along with homemade creamy cakes and biscuits.

Of course, at the time when she had lost Alfie it had been unimaginably terrible. She had felt for days, months, even (she could see now, looking back) for years, as if she was living someone else’s life, automatically doing all the right things, continuing on with the details of daily life that she knew. All that wasted love and hope. But when she remembered that young girl at the church, holding those daffodils as though they were her newborn (who was she?) her heart hardened, just a little, and she felt just a little stronger. Posie sighed, patted the locket into place. And now life was running away too
fast for her, at least it felt like that some days. She seemed to be dwelling on sadnesses past too often for comfort, of late.

But perhaps she was flat today as a natural follow on from yesterday’s adventure. Yes! Immediately, she felt brighter. That must be it. The little party today was sure to revive her spirits, make her more like her usual self.

#

Sun streamed into the living room to wake Clementine just before seven on Saturday. She rolled off the couch groggily. A few drinks and she was rubbish, even with food to soak up the alcohol.

The flat was silent, though she could hear the muted sound of traffic. In the bathroom she pressed the light switch, hoping the electric light would help wake her up properly. Nothing happened. She would have to rely solely on her shower. Turning the taps, she heard the plumbing groan, but no water splurted out. Frowning in the dim light, Clementine played with the taps for a minute before she gave up went back out to the living room.

“Hey good day to you,” said Benita, opening the front door and leaning in to pull off her running shoes. “Coffee? I’m making, just before I sprint into the shower.”

“Or not,” said Clementine. “I think you’ll have to wait.”

“No way,” said Benita, quickly crossing the hall to the bathroom. Clementine heard her voice, hollowed by the shower recess. “No way!” The click of the light switch, then Benita swearing. “Must be the hot water tank. Guy said it needed replacing. Storm must have knocked it out completely. Light’s gone too. Shit.”

“I really would love you to stay with me,” Clementine called out from the lounge room. “There’s heaps of room.”

Benita stomped back through the lounge to the kitchen. “I made it before I went running. Always need it as soon as I get back.” Clementine heard the sound of coffee being poured. “Okay, you’ve twisted my arm. No chance of getting a tradie out today or tomorrow.” She handed a mug to Clementine. “Sugar, one.” Benita sniffed under her arms, made a face and laughed. “Man, I miss those backpacking days!” She looked at
her phone, gulped some coffee. “We’d better step on it.” She crossed the hall into her bedroom. Clementine heard cupboards and draws opening. Ten minutes later, her friend emerged, a sizeable overnight bag in hand. “Ready. What time is the friendly neighbour coming round?”

“Five past eight,” said Clementine.

“It’ll be quick showers, then.” Benita rolled her eyes. “Did you hear that wanker? An engagement party, so he can’t go to the opening of an exhibition on cane toads? Please!” She led the way downstairs to a red Toyota Echo. There was hardly any traffic and soon they were cruising down the Pacific Highway, sitting right on the speed limit.

“I know this area, had a boy used to live here way back when.” But suddenly, as they turned left from Pennant Hills Road, Benny pulled the wheel sharply to the right. “Crikey! Sorry. Road isn’t really big enough for two of us. Not the way he’s driving.”

Clementine recognised the car, and the retriever sitting in the front seat. “That was Brett. And Snuffles.”

“Brett?” Benita twisted in her seat to stare. “How come you know the local men by name so early on? Not to mention their dogs.”

“He’s the one who’s going to come over to pick me up for this thing in town.” Benita frowned. “He’ll be cutting it fine.”

“I’ll be cutting it fine,” said Clementine. “Thanks so much for the lift.”

Benita’s phone rang as they pulled up. “It’s the boss, got to take it.”

Clementine hopped out and opened the door to Emily’s house.

“Sir?” Benita wrestled her bag out of the back seat. “Yes sir, I’m planning to go. Sir?” Clementine saw her friend straighten, lean back against the car door and stiffen, and she felt it, felt the thrill of something big, something unexpected. A break in the case. She waited, watching as two birds that had flown into the branches of a tree as the car pulled in — Eastern Rosellas! What beauties! Her father’s voice full of pleasure — descended to bob around in a patch of grass that was due for a mow.

“Yes, sir. As soon as possible, sir. Probably about an hour, a bit less.”

Clementine looked a question.

“Strangest thing, that mad scientist we spoke to yesterday — ” Benita broke off.
“Actually, it’s probably all hush-hush for now. Sorry.”

“No worries. Two showers, so go for your life.”

Benita had beautified and left by eight ten. Clementine waved her off, locked the door and sat on the grass in the sun watching the rosellas. Eight fifteen. Eight twenty. Had she misheard him? Misunderstood? Was he on a dog day out? She wished again that she had a phone number for Brett.

#

“Ready, Minnie?” Posie took up her handbag, secure in the knowledge of what it held. “We will need to leave soon to make the train. Have you the papers?”

Posie especially enjoyed the Saturday papers. Sometimes there were such interesting, in depth stories. Of course, it was equally the case that sometimes the papers seemed full of information about shallow celebrities, many of whom Posie had trouble working out what they were famous for. As her mother would say, it was a changing world.

Minerva was frowning at the pile on the hall table. “There are far too many supplements these days.”

“Perhaps we can take just the interesting parts,” said Posie. “If we fold them, they will fit down the side of the basket and in the esky as extra padding. How fortunate we are to have a fine morning! How blue the sky is!”

On the train, Posie shared out the sections of the paper. She was left with the front section of the Herald. She started reading. When she had been young, it had been African children they had prayed for, Africa the missionaries had gone to, Africans who hadn’t had enough to eat or education. Now it was Australian children that her prayer group collected for, children who lived in communities in the Northern Territory and in Western Australia and in Queensland. Children who lived in places that sounded worse than Africa in some ways, although just as hot and with just as many dangerous animals. Jesus loved the little children, Posie had always loved that Sunday school song, whatever she thought of God and Jesus in general these days. Red and yellow, black and white, all were precious in his sight, Jesus loved the little children of the world.
That was as it should be, children were precious, every one of them. But what could she do for those poor Australian children, the ones who were if this newspaper account was to be believed, malnourished, poorly educated, dying from neglect? She heard Tanya squeal and looked up.

“Oh my God,” said Tanya.

Posie saw two teenage boys laugh and imitate her. Katie looked embarrassed, of course, even though she and Hugh were sitting, with Lily, a couple of seats away. “Tan!” she said, through gritted teeth. Posie remembered what, felt like to be embarrassed by your sister. Hugh just yawned and closed his eyes. Lily, startled, looked up, then quickly back down at her book.

“What is it?” whispered Sally.

“Read this,” hissed Tanya, shoving the paper at Sally.

Posie, vaguely interested now but still thinking about the little children, watched Sally’s eyes get big, her mouth open in a little “o”. Sally looked up, looked at Posie and Minerva, watching, said, uncertainly, “Oh, it’s nothing, just a — an interesting thing about —” and then she stopped, obviously not wanting to continue.

“Let me see,” said Minerva, holding her hand out. Well, no-one would say no to Minnie when she asked like that. Posie hummed under her breath, it was such a catchy song, if only Jesus’ love could save those little children from such dreadful lives.

Glancing unhappily at Tanya, who looked equally unhappy, Sally handed the paper to Minerva. Minerva opened her mouth to read aloud, then closed it. Now Posie gave Minnie her full attention. What could it be? “Minnie, dear?”

Minerva looked up, nodded towards the children. Ah. Not suitable. Very wise, Minnie was always careful. Posie waited patiently till her friend handed over the paper, the problem of the children, the ones living in communities, eddying round her mind. But when she started reading, the problem of the children was forgotten.

‘Bodies found: Police fear serial killer on the loose. At least two bodies have been found in the Lane Cove National Park. One of the bodies was found in a shallow cave. It is believed the bodies are both female and that they have been dead for some time. Although the bodies were in the same general area, they were not found
together. It is thought that at least one of the bodies may have been there for years. That part of the park, including pedestrian access bridges for creek crossings, was destroyed by fire nearly ten years ago and then again a few years later, limiting its accessibility to bushwalkers. Police are searching the area for further information.’

Lane Cove National Park? Posie raised her head from the paper, shocked.

“Unpleasantly close to home,” said Minerva, looking at Posie in such a way that Posie felt queasy. Surely Minerva couldn’t be thinking what Posie was thinking? Couldn’t be thinking the worst? But — it wasn’t just Minerva, that much was clear. All the happy-party-mood had leaked out of Sally and Tanya. Katie and Hugh, thank goodness, they had taken Lily to sit with them, they were still huddled together whispering to each other at the other end of the carriage. But Sally and Tanya and Minnie … Posie felt horribly certain that they were all thinking the same thing.

“I’m sure there must be some mistake,” said Posie. She waited for someone to agree, but they all avoided her eyes.

Posie never liked to think the worst, of anyone or anything, but she knew quite well from experience that sometimes the worst was the right thing to think. The queasy feeling in her tummy began to be painful. She read the paragraph again but there was no more information to be had. At least two bodies did imply, somehow, that there were quite likely more than two. At least two bodies hinted at something much worse than simply a bushwalker who somehow got lost and died in the bush, perhaps bitten by a snake, sad and terrible though that would be. And she had seen Ivan Milat’s brothers on the train yesterday. Posie lifted her handbag slightly, to feel the weight of the gun. These terrible stories were all too common. But Eleanora? Surely such a thing could not have happened to Eleanora? Oh, it was impossible. But then, her vanishing at all was impossible, surreal, unbelievable. When Posie had been left holding the baby all those years ago, she had known that something incontrovertibly bad had happened, but there were many different sorts of badness, after all. They didn’t all involve the evil intervention of another human being. It would have been bad if Eleanora had left Robbie, for whatever reason; they had always seemed so happy, so made for each other. But Posie knew that things were not always what they seemed. Minnie’s husband had
seemed very happy too, and so had Minnie. Until the day she left. Still Posie was as sure as one could reasonably be that Robbie and Eleanora had been made for each other, they had made a life together, that they had made each other happy. But what she would have given to be wrong! For Robbie to be unmasked as a villain, for Ella to have had to leave to save herself.

#

Brett screeched into the driveway just after eight thirty. The rosellas squawked and flapped into the air. Clementine brushed grassy bits off her jeans as she stood up and went to the car. Brett threw the door open.

“Sorry,” he said. “Bit of drama with the dog. Had to go to the vet. We’d better look snappy now.”

Look snappy? Clementine strapped the seatbelt on, noticing Brett was out of the driveway before she’d done so.

Brett parked in the pub car park. “Nobody’ll notice if we leave it here,” he said. “Do it all the time.” Clementine was pleased to see him lean over into the back seat and take a rolled up paper. “Delivered Saturdays,” he said. “We can share it on the train.”

Which means we don’t have to talk, thought Clementine. Thank you very much.

The train was almost empty. “I work in the Museum too, sort of, sort of casually, I’m cataloguing some of the collections,” said Brett. Clementine sensed the hopefulness. She made a noise of acknowledgement but kept her eyes on the paper.

#

Posie left the paper on the train. “Come, help me with the steps, Lily,” she said, taking Lily’s hand tightly in her own.

“Posie — ” began Sally, her voice uncertain.

“Posie!” said Minerva.

But Posie ignored them both. “It is such a lovely day, Lily, I am sure we will see many birds in Hyde Park.”
“Only dirty old ibis and pigeons,” said Lily, scuffing her shoes and trying to read her book as they walked.

Despite that article in the newspaper, Posie wasn’t too fussed about having the gun in her hand today. With all of them walking together through the city on a crowded, sunny day (miraculously, and against all forecasts!) she felt quite safe. And anyway, from what she knew of serial killers they would not attack a family group, they relied on isolating their victims. No, that story had been terrible and serial killers were monsters but she didn’t have anything to fear from them today. That story could not be connected to her Ella. Posie was happy just to know the gun was at the bottom of her best navy blue handbag. The bag was a little old-fashioned in style perhaps, but good as new when it came to being sturdy and capacious. It might even prove to be a weapon in its own right.

“Oh, look, Lily, a man pulling a rabbit out of a hat!” Posie pointed up towards the avenue of figs, definitely unladylike, but who cared about such things these days. “I have only ever seen such a thing in Turkey, many years before you were born. When Minerva and I went on our Grand Tour.” She hadn’t taken her gun there, which had probably been a mistake.

“It’s not a real rabbit,” said Lily, glancing up from her book.

But Posie didn’t hear. Surely it couldn’t be Ella, so close to home after all this time.

#

Clementine didn’t think Brett had stopped talking since the train stopped at Town Hall and she had to stop reading. By the time they were at Hyde Park, she was literally gritting her teeth.

“That magician, or whatever he is, a Council gimmick, I guess. And there’s an ibis, that’s the project I was telling you about … ”

Clementine slowly turned and stopped.

“Hello there,” said Peter.
He could hardly believe it when he spotted them coming up the path together. Were all the planets finally aligning for him instead of against?

Clementine smiled. “This is your usual haunt?”

“Well, one of them,” said Peter, laughing. “What’re you up to? Time to catch up?”

“Actually, we’re on our way to an exhibition opening,” said Clementine, pointing in the direction of the Captain Cook statue.

Peter pretended not to understand.

“About Captain Cook?”

“About — ” Clementine turned to Brett inquiringly.

“Cane toads,” said Brett. “At the Museum.”

Peter put a surprised look on his face. “I saw Benny heading over there before. Maybe she’s got a warrant out for a toad.”

“Benny?” repeated Clementine.

“With an older bloke,” said Peter. “Looked like a cop, too.” He watched Brett. Saw his eyes widen, but when Peter followed his gaze, he saw Brett focused on two women standing near the rotunda.

“Hey!” he yelled.

Peter watched as the two women waved back. Hard to be sure from this distance, but they looked attractive. Blonde, not too thin, not too young. They looked familiar, too. He was pretty sure that they had walked past him earlier, with a couple of old ladies and some teenagers and a kid.

“My wife,” said Brett, turning to Clementine. “And Tanya, great friend of ours. Come and I’ll introduce you.”

Clementine seemed slightly flustered. “See you,” she said. Yes, you will, thought Peter. Those old ladies had been talking about the best place to have their picnic. They’d be back. And maybe he’d get lucky again. Old ladies were generally his greatest fans.
As they drew closer, Clementine thought she saw body language signalling caution and displeasure. She wondered if they had been interrupted in a tete-a-tete. The two women looked none too pleased about something.

“Sally, this is Emily’s friend — ” Brett paused and Clementine realised that he’d forgotten her name.

“Clementine,” she said, smiling at both women. They gave her automatic smiles, said their names, but it was obvious that their attention was elsewhere.

“Did you read the papers this morning?” said Tanya to Brett.

Brett looked blank. “Sort of. Did I miss something?”

“Quite likely,” said Sally.

Tanya nudged Sally away from Brett. “Remains found in LCNP,” she said “Close to home. Been there years.” She nodded significantly. “It sounds like it really could be her.”

Clementine felt her body reacting. Queasiness, tension travelling up her jaw, into her limbs. Whatever it was, it wasn’t good. She stepped out of the little circle, kept on smiling.

“It was on the news last night, too,” Sally said.

“I saw that,” said Brett. Clementine heard surprise in his voice, along with the shock. “But wasn’t that — I thought there was — I mean, it said a serial killer. I didn’t think of — of her.”

Clementine had stopped smiling now. It really didn’t seem appropriate. She watched an ibis cautiously step closer, legs folding awkwardly, weirdly. Wasn’t there some folklore or mythology around the birds that associated them with death? Saw them as heralds of it?

“I know, it seems so unreal,” said Tanya, stepping forward, patting his arm.

“I don’t think it can be her,” said Sally. “It makes no sense at all.”

Clementine had heard that before. It never made any sense, not when it was one of your own. And the closer you were to a person, the more unbelievable it always was, in her experience. She watched the ibis stalk its way to the picnic basket behind Tanya
and Sally.

“Hey!” she said. “Get away from it.” She took two, three steps toward the bird. Sally turned and screamed, snatching up the basket and spilling the contents of her handbag. The ibis ran. Clementine bent to pick up the memory stick and the sunglasses case that had landed on her feet.

“Oh, how I hate them,” said Sally, opening the bag so Brett and Tanya could drop in the things they’d collected too. “Nasty, evil-looking things. Thanks, Clementine.” She snatched at the memory stick. “I don’t know what I’d do if I lost my latest back-up. I don’t trust those clouds.”

“My pleasure,” said Clementine.

“We’d better get going,” said Tanya, checking her watch. “It would be too awful if we missed anything now.”

#

“Let me tell you a story.” Robbie paused for a drink of water. “Let me tell you a story about a toad, a Giant Toad. Once upon a time, in the nineteen thirties in Australia, before cane toads were introduced, there was a very pesky problem. Queensland sugarcane farmers discovered that cane beetle larvae were eating the roots of their sugarcane, thus killing or stunting the plants. The solution? Import some Giant Toads from America, they’ll eat up all the beetles and fix the problem. But the beetles ran way, way up the stalks of the sugarcane, and the Giant Toads were too heavy to jump up and eat them. So they waddled around below, protected by the sugarcane from the elements, able to seek and destroy to their heart’s content.” Less avuncular storyteller, Robbie, more the scientific researcher. “Before the arrival of Bufo Marinus, Australia was a toad-free zone. This is a narrative of extinction that points firmly to man as the major culprit. The destruction of ecosystem is set in place by his hand. The face of the Cane Toad became well-known through the documentary ‘Cane Toads’, which held the public enthralled. Since then, the Cane Toad has conquered and divided so much new territory that there’s very little left to laugh at.”

Robbie paused to take another drink.
He continued. “Ecosystem decay, faunal collapse and relaxation to equilibrium are phrases that slip uneasily off our tongues. Off some tongues, I should say — for many of us, they are new phrases, words that suggest a darkness we don’t want to believe. But these words are becoming better known to the layperson. It is hoped that our exhibition will show how the island ecosystem of Australia is at threat, as diversity is lost from every habitat that the cane toad hops into. It is to be hoped that, by making this ugly and dangerous invader the pin-up boy for our exhibition, we might meet the criteria of entertaining, informing and providing food for thought.” He cleared his throat again. “Am a I magician? Alas, no. Would that I were, and so could reverse the impact of the toad. But as things stand, all I can do is speak forth the words of the Magi, who say we need to find a way to exterminate the toad before our wildlife and ecosystems are irreversibly damaged beneath its heavy hop of an ecological footprint.”

The applause was fervent. People went over read the posters. The donation boxes, with their catchy slogans “One more for the Toad … ” were doing good business. One man near Clementine began talking loudly about the original cane toad movie, describing in graphic detail how the toads had “popped” when they were squashed to death by a Combi van. She moved away from him. Hang on, was that Benita over there?

Before she could catch her friend’s eye, her phone rang. She grabbed it quickly. “Hello?” She edged into a corridor to hear better.

Her breathing grew shallower as she listened. She held the phone away from her so that Emily wouldn’t hear any sounds of distress. By the time her friend had finished bubbling over with excitement — “Such an opportunity to stay another ten days! Take part in a master class! Meet everyone!” — Clementine was prepared.

“And like you say, I’m going to be around for weeks. There is one thing, though. I’ve asked my friend Benita to stay — at your place. She’s got a problem with her hot water.”

“Honey! You know me, I love a crowd. Besides, it lets me out of any guilty feelings. I’m so pleased you’re not there by yourself. Hope she’s there when I get back. If you can get a couple of single men in, even better!”

“Ha, ha,” said Clementine, automatically.
“Listen, my phone’s about to cark it, I’ll call you later, give you the low down on all the neighbours.”
“See you soon,” and Clementine was speaking to a dead line.

*

‘I’ve always been a good liar. Perhaps because I don’t put the stock in truth telling that most people I know do. I worked it out pretty quickly, what would wash and what wouldn’t. As Carl Jung said, the greatest gift you can give yourself is a little bit of your own attention. I agree with that, in principle; I’d just change the sentiment ever so slightly and say the greatest gift you can give yourself is your full attention, full stop. I mean, let’s be honest: that’s really what everyone wants, whatever they say. None of us ever really grow up, though some are better at looking like they have. Like me. Some of us are better secret-keepers, too. I’m particularly good at keeping secrets, and at the same time looking like I have none. That’s the trick to it, really. We all have them, but only some of us have what it takes to hide them in plain sight. It’s a matter of survival.’
CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Radiance Gently Rapping

Robbie was relieved it was over. He searched the crowd for faces he wanted to see.

Instead, he saw the policewoman from the day before. She appeared right next to him. He didn’t recognise her straight away. She was more casually dressed, even less threatening than yesterday. Seeing her looking at him, smiling, he smiled vaguely back at her. Before he saw the man by her side. It had been nearly ten years, but Robbie recognized him straight away.

“Inspector,” he said, slowly. Send out the clowns and send in the big gun. How had they found out?

“Dr Ravell. And it’s Carroll Carruthers. Carroll,” said the Inspector pleasantly.

“Robbie,” said Robbie, automatically.

“Is there somewhere we could talk?” And now Robbie remembered fully the energy of Carruthers, the inexorable firmness, the clear-sightedness of his vision. Fear and panic scrambled in his throat, looking for an exit. His animals, his precious animals. Robbie felt something inside him crumple and lie still.

He pushed a path through the crowd, through a door into a staff corridor and into the nearest room. It was an unused office, dingy and dirty with neglect and lack of ownership. Robbie saw the assortment of ill-matched chairs and a tired desk but noticed nothing except the look on the policeman’s face. Why did you do it, Robbie? What are you hiding?

Carruthers never took his eyes from Robbie’s. Robbie sat back into a chair with a missing roller as Paterson pushed into the room as well, closing the door behind her. He saw Carruthers frown. He waited for the question, the accusation, the statement of fact.

“Robbie, I am very sorry to have to come to you today.” Carruthers leant
forward on his chair, so close to Robbie now that their knees almost touched. “But this is news that unfortunately cannot wait.”

What was the man saying? His manner was kind, gentle, almost pitying; there was no blame, no accusation.

“I am very sorry to inform you that we have good grounds for thinking that remains found recently in Lane Cove National Park may be those of your wife, Eleanora.”

Robbie had woken from so many dreams like this over the years, dreams where her disappearance had been a dream, where she had been laughing, teasing, telling him what a silly-billy you are to worry, that she was simply on holiday and working at her art, at her writing, at herself, that all she needed was a little time. The days of those dreams had gentled into days of incomprehensible hope, where Robbie had felt a bubble full of happiness protect him from the bad old world. Until night fell once again.

Then meaning lanced him.

“You don’t know for sure,” said Robbie, leaning forward head in hand. “You said think.” He felt dizzy, giddy and ashamed. He knew her best. Why hadn’t he seen what Carruthers was going to tell him? How could he not have known the important, irreversible fact before the words were spoken, before the poison floated out into the atmosphere, shifting all the meanings, changing everything.

“That’s right. But I must tell you, Robbie, that our evidence for thinking so is compelling.” Carruthers paused. “We will have to wait for forensic evidence for identification. But — do you remember telling me about your wife’s ring, Robbie?”

Robbie twisted his own ring from his finger. Matching rings! A thing of beauty is a joy forever. Now we can show everyone that we belong together forever and ever. It’s loveliness increases. It will never pass into nothingness. Evermore.

“Forever, evermore”,’ said Carruthers, taking it, reading the inscription. “Robbie, I need to inform you that a ring matching this one was found with the body.” He paused. “With the remains.”

A thing of beauty is a joy forever. Evermore. That had been their original idea for an inscription, but the length had been unwieldy, had prompted a rethinking.

“At the time of Eleanora’s disappearance — ”
“Ella,” whispered Robbie. “I thought of happy ever after, at first. You know, the fairytale ending.” He made a strange noise. “Ella used to say that was our story.”

“Because of the ring we wanted to come to you at once.” Carruthers held out Robbie’s ring for him. “We wanted to come to you straight away before someone in the media makes any connection,” said Carruthers. “While we hope that won’t happen, with you holding a public position and being so accessible — we didn’t want you to be surprised. Otherwise we would have waited for a more appropriate time.”

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Inspector,” said Robbie. The man was thoughtful, Robbie remembered that very clearly. Thoughtful and considered. A patient predator. Top of the food chain. Unlikely to make a mistake.

“Would you like us to ask someone to come to you?” The young woman spoke this time.

“No.” No, he didn’t want the reality of that. What was there to be said? What could anyone do? “There’s no definite news, you said. And I’m responsible for this exhibition. Ella would want me to keep going.” He knew it was the truth and it was what he wanted, too. To push away the ugly truth as long as he possibly could.

Carruthers nodded. “Whatever you like,” he said easily. “But if it’s alright with you, Robbie, I’d like Constable Paterson here to mingle with the crowd a bit. To see if she can pick up any gossip about the missing exhibits from other staff members. Perhaps have an informal chat to some of you and your wife’s friends and acquaintances.” It was said pleasantly, deferentially, even but Robbie recognised a non-negotiable request when he heard one.

“I’d like to help you any way I can, of course,” he said. “Please, be my guest.”

The young policewoman smiled at him. “You’ve got my phone number, from yesterday, too, if you want to talk.”

#

Back in the main hall, Robbie looked around the room but everything looked different now. His vision blurred and instead of posters of cane toads he saw the “missing” posters of Ella. In those posters she was smiling, her hair floating about her
face, tendrils beckoning him to reach out and touch. Her eyes were looking into his, blue and gentle, full of loving intelligence and wicked laughter. Her mouth was slightly parted, speaking to him. The blue shirt she wore in the photo was the one that still hung in the wardrobe, waiting for her to come home. Robbie felt his breathing slow as he focused on the image of Ella. He tried to look at nothing else, to think of nothing else, to be in the moment with her.

But he felt a presence at his shoulder, a muted “Dr Ravell?” It was the young policewoman again. He kept trying to see Ella as he turned to face her, but the policewoman was real and breathing and in front of him and his vision slid sideways.

#

Back in the exhibition room, Clementine searched the crowd.

“Benny!” she said, tapping her friend on the shoulder.

“Oh, hi,” said Benita, uncharacteristically subdued. Her eyes were saying something, but exactly what Clementine couldn’t tell.

“Enjoying?” Even while Clementine was speaking, conversations, bits and pieces of information clicked into place like a pieces of a puzzle. This was the Museum, this was the cane toad exhibition and Emily’s friend Robbie was the mad professor-type who the police had talked to about missing exhibits. He was also the person standing next to Benita. That probably explained her manner. Clementine smiled at Robbie.

“I’m Emily’s friend,” she said. “She told me to come to your opening and I’m glad I did.”

Robbie stared. Clementine wondered if there’d been some substance in what Benita’s brash colleague had said. Perhaps Robbie was one of those awkward scientific types who were more comfortable talking to microscopes than to people. Or perhaps he was still thinking about cane toads and didn’t understand the connection with Emily. She looked at Benita again. Why was her friend so ill at ease? Not that anyone but herself would notice, thought Clementine.

“Your speech was great, Dr Ravell, I mean Robbie,” said Benita, still refusing to meet Clementine’s gaze.
“Yeah, very interesting,” said Clementine, taking the cue. “And true. I lived in the Top End for a while, and they were killing off everything. Crocs, goannas, dragons. Everyone had a story of death by cane toad.” There, that should be a conversation starter.

Instead, she felt the mystifying tension grow.

Then Brett appeared, talking just a bit too loudly, thrusting an unwanted glass of champagne into her hand.

“Sorry, shouldn’t have left you by yourself,” he said. Clementine smelt the alcohol wafting from him. Maybe that explained a few things. Perhaps it was better that he didn’t realise that she had deliberately slipped away from him under cover of the applause.

“See you two’ve met,” Brett looked from Clementine to Robbie. “Robbie, this is Clem, Emily’s old school buddy.” But Robbie simply stared at the posters on the wall.

Brett waved a hand back and forth across his field of vision.

“It’s okay,” said Clementine, wanting to say: Stop it!

Now Brett was actually putting his hands over Robbie’s eyes. Robbie shook his head and pushed at Brett’s hands. “You smell,” he said, wrinkling his nose.

“Someone threw a glass of wine at me,” said Brett. Robbie shook his head again.

“I’m sorry, I was miles away,” he said to Clementine. “Nice to meet you. I hope you’ll come to our little party in the park.”

Clementine noticed Brett was staring at Benita. “This is an old friend of mine,” she said. “Brett, Benita.”

“Hi, old friend. I’m sure you’re welcome to join us in the park too if you like, the more the merrier,” said Brett.

Robbie cleared his throat and gasped out a laugh. “Yes, why don’t you. The more the merrier. My thinking exactly.”

Brett look puzzled, then he leaned in toward Robbie and nodded toward Clementine. “Excuse us for a mo, business to see to,” and he was directing Robbie towards a group of middle-aged men. Clementine thought they looked like money men. Perhaps Brett saw an opportunity to procure funding? Or perhaps he was protecting
Robbie? Whatever it was, Clementine stayed with her first impression about Brett. There was something there that didn’t quite add up.

Left alone with Benita, she was blunt.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“It’s the Museum. We’re interested in the Museum. In the thefts, you know.” Benita didn’t look at her.

“I don’t believe you,” said Clementine. “We’ve both done the liar course, remember?” That was one thing about the police, it gave you a lot of useful skills for civilian life, skills such as being able to make a pretty accurate call about truth-telling.

“It’s true,” her friend protested. Before Clementine could say anything more, Tanya joined them.

“Did I hear someone say something about thefts from the Museum? Not meaning to butt in, but it’s been all over the news, lately,” said Tanya, clinking her champagne glass with Clementine and attempting to do likewise with Benita. “Do you have some inside goss? But you don’t have any champagne! I’m Tanya. One of Robbie’s — Dr Ravell’s — neighbours.” She smiled at them and raised her glass. “All over the news, about how some exhibits have gone missing; quite a lot, actually. Rare ones, ones that have been kept hidden away forever. It sounded like it was just a coincidence that somebody found they were missing at all. But there’s heaps of them gone.” She smiled again, expectantly this time. “How do you know Robbie?”

Benita coughed. “I’m part of the investigative team. Dr Ravell was kind enough to meet with us the other day and — er — give us a few pointers. He mentioned his exhibition and we thought it might be a good idea to come along. Mingle with the crowd, you know. There’s all sorts of museum folk here, opportunities for tons of useful conversations.” Clementine noticed her friend still didn’t look her in the eye.

Tanya’s eyes widened. “Oh are you with the police?”

“The police?” Sally came up next to Tanya.

Clementine heard the uncertainty in Sally’s voice, saw Tanya swing round reassuringly.

“It’s about the exhibits, sweetie, the missing ones.” Tanya touched Sally lightly on the arm.
“Oh, I thought it might be about Ella.” Sally’s disappointment was clear.

“Ella?” Benita looked confused, but Clementine knew that look. Her friend was playing for time.

“The exhibits aren’t the only things missing.” Tanya took a swig of champagne and both she and Sally looked to the left of Clementine. Clementine sensed someone squeezing in next to her; sure enough Brett was back.

“We were just talking about Ella,” said Tanya, loudly.

“Oh, I get it,” said Brett. “The other missing thing is Ella.” He burped, discreetly, but Clementine heard.

“Robbie’s wife,” said Tanya to Benita and Clementine.

“Brett, you’re drinking too much,” said Sally, coldly.

“We’ve been so afraid, since we read the paper this morning,” said Tanya. “There was a body found in the national park near us. It sounded like it might be her.”

Clementine could see Benita knew exactly what they were talking about. She seemed to be the only one not fully in the picture. But another thing she’d learnt from the police: if there was a group of people talking about a topic you wanted information on and you were prepared to wait long enough, mostly the information you wanted would come to you. Especially if the other people wanted information too.

Benita raised an eyebrow in Tanya’s direction. “The story in the Herald? Do you mind telling me why you connected it with Eleanora Ravell?”

“Well — the location. And the time,” said Tanya. “Because, let’s face it, we all knew that Ella must be — dead! Whatever anyone actually said. However we tried to tell ourselves that there might be some other explanation. She never would have just up and left. Never.”

“People do all the time,” said Benita. Clementine saw her eyes flick to Sally to include her in the conversation.

But it was Tanya that answered. “You don’t know Ella!” she said, shaking her head. “Or Robbie. They were the advertisement for the perfect couple. And she adored Hugh. Lily, too, of course,” she added, clearly, Clementine thought, as an afterthought. “Though she was only a baby.”

Sally whispered in Tanya’s ear, then smiled at Clementine. “I’m so sorry, it’s
very unsettling for us thinking that perhaps our friend might be connected to that newspaper report.” She tapped Tanya’s arm. “We need to get the picnic organised, Posie’s looking a bit overwhelmed by it all. I’ll make sure Brett’s borrowing some of those folding chairs and a card table like he said he could.” She nodded to where Posie could be seen peering earnestly at a large photograph of a cane toad. “I hope you’re joining us, Clementine.”

“Of course,” said Clementine. “Emily’s directed me to give her the lowdown on every detail of this event.”

“I’ll need to get going,” said Benita, smiling. “Nice to meet you both. Walk over to the park with me, Clem?”

#

“And?” was Clementine’s question, as soon as they were out of earshot. Their feet slapped loudly on the stairs.

Benita explained. “So we had to come and tell him straight away because of the media. Amazing they’re not onto it yet, it can’t be long.” She spoke softly, checking to see no one overheard.

“Well, you’ll know when that time comes, now you’re staying down the street from him. What do the police think happened?” said Clementine. She wriggled her shoulders to dislodge the tension.

“Well, it’s unlikely she crawled into a cave a couple of kilometres from her home and lay down to die.” Benita led the way out into a perfect blue sky day. “The investigation, this new one, it’s going to be a nightmare.

Clementine could easily imagine it. Days of interviews, combing through the dialogue, through the timelines, looking for that one thing that didn’t fit with the rest of somebody’s story. “Is there any question about it being a — random event?” she asked. The traffic flow stopped and the light went green.

“There’s always the question, but you and I know how unlikely that actually is,” said her friend.

“How sure are you that it’s her?” Clementine noticed that Benita kept on the
footpath, kept walking up Park Street.

“Officially? No way of knowing yet,” said Benita firmly. “Unofficially? It’s her.” She sighed. “She was a mum, too. Two kids. One of them was so young she wouldn’t remember her at all. There’s an old Aunty, who brought her up. Plus Dr Ravell, of course.”

Clementine looked left at Hyde Park, up to where Peter was standing. “Emily’s place is huge, you know. Even for two people.” Benita followed her glance.

“Our friend from last night,” said Clementine, nodding in Peter’s direction. “I spoke to him on the way in. Remember he said he worked as a researcher?”

“Funny sort of research,” said Benita. “For someone who’s been one of us. Especially for his type.”

They exchanged a glance. He was a type they’d both known well at one time or another. Not someone you’d want to trust entirely with your heart but a good man to rely on in a crisis. Probably house trained but not calling any special place home. A good friend, a complicated lover, and a man whose personal demons would likely drive him down roads not found on any easily available maps. A type you needed to be able to recognise, a type that could be very valuable in police work. A type that could also be the author of spectacular work gone wrong. Clementine flashed back to one of her colleagues in the Territory. Rambo had become famous for the files he’d collected and taken home, then literally stashed under his bed and promptly forgotten about. It wasn’t till he’d transferred out that she’d found him sneaking the files back into the office. He’d cheerfully admitted to her where they’d been, pointing out that their disappearance hadn’t hampered the investigation at all, they’d got their man. Even behaved as though his remarkable behaviour was something to be admired, in collating all the information together before anyone had seen the need. Not focusing on the fact of forgetting, removing highly confidential information, police property, not securing it properly. There was something of the Rambo about this man. Something that said he’d be completely focused while he was on the case, but when he’d left it behind, that would be that, there’d be no U-turns to look at it again. A man you’d want on your side when the corner was tight but one who might need more space than there was in the everyday. A man who’d be good to have on hand to have your back. And he was just the type of man
to appeal to her friend.

“You’re thinking of asking Peter to stay.”

“I thought it might be nice,” said Clementine. “I thought you might think it might be nice. Only if you’ll stay too. I mean — don’t you think it’s an opportunity? And like you said, he’s one of us, used to be, anyway.” Seeing the skepticism on her friend’s face: “I don’t want to be alone in that house. In any house! With two of you, my odds are lessened on that score. Emily just called and said she’ll be another week. I wouldn’t invite him to stay with me, just me. But if you’re there too — the kindness of strangers and all that. I’d like to. Besides which, your plumbing isn’t fixed,” she finished.

“Hm. You don’t know him. We don’t know him,” said Benita. “Would you invite a strange man into your home, little girl?”

They both laughed.

“You said you thought he was someone you’d like to know better, last night,” said Clementine, slyly. “And what happened to when in Rome? Isn’t Sydney supposed to be renowned for its friendliness?”

“Just remember, it isn’t me who suggested it,” said Benita. “Okay, I’ve got to get on now. I’ll see you back at the ranch, partner.”

“But aren’t you coming?” said Clementine. “Perfect opportunity.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Benita. “Sounds like I’m going to have heaps of opportunity now we’re all living so cosy! I’d really like to, and you’re right it could be useful but I’ve got to get back to the station to get the ball rolling. On this and some other stuff. And get your luggage.”

“At least say hello to Peter.” Clementine nodded in his direction

“Hello to Peter and that’s all,” said Benita, matching Clementine’s stride up into Hyde Park. “What do you think Dr Ravell’s going to feel like when he sees the police camping practically on his doorstep?”
CHAPTER FOURTEEN
A Curious Volume of Forgotten Lore

Out in the sunshine, away from the questions and cane toads at last, Robbie blinked, smiling vaguely and took an unwanted swig at the bottle of beer. He only really liked beer if the weather was sultry. “Just the ticket,” he said, untruthfully. Why was he bothering to be so damned polite? What did it matter now?

Brett held his own beer at arm’s length, twisting it toward Lily so that she could see the picture. “Whaddya think, Lil? Think that’s what the Tassie tiger would have looked like?”

“It’s real name is thylacine, and it’s a wolf, not a tiger,” said Lily. “To call it a tiger is a mis-nom-er.” She said the word slowly, as if relishing the opportunity to use it. “And it might not be extinct. There are sightings all the time in Tasmania. There might be one out there somewhere, living in the bush. Maybe more than one.”

“I guess there might,” said Brett gravely. “Why not?”

“I’ve heard there’ve been sightings in Queensland, and in Victoria, too, isn’t that right, Robbie?” said Sally touching him lightly on the arm, smiling at him. “Here, let me take that beer for you,” and without Robbie having to do or say anything, she took it out of his hand, put it on the grass and (magic!) gave him a glass of wine instead. “Your preferred tipple, I think.”

He smiled at her gratefully. “When the word extinction is spoken aloud, there are always last-hope sightings of the animals,” he said, all the time hearing Carruther’s voice in his ears. ‘We are very sorry Mr Ravell but we think that the remains might be those of your wife ...’. “People don’t realize the importance or the beauty, of what we have until it’s too late. Then they begin to think magically about it. Not causally.”

There was a respectful silence.

Clementine saw Katie tug at Sally’s sleeve, saw Sally turn, her frown turn to a smile when she saw Katie. “I’m sorry, I thought you were Brett, asking me if we could eat yet — again.” Sally laughed. Tanya and Katie laughed with her.

“Hey, Sally, do you remember when I was a little girl —”
“I certainly do. You were so beautiful. And you still are.” Sally’s luminous smile encompassed Clementine as well. “Like the angel on the Christmas tree.”

Katie blushed. “Well, thank you. But what I wanted to ask was, do you remember one day when Tan and me were at your place, and I snuck out to your fishpond, exactly where you’d told me not to go —”

“This is a story that’s hard to believe,” said Tanya, rolling her eyes. Clementine saw that they were clearly sisters, Katie’s fair Dresden china doll prettiness had the same big blue eyes and expressive mouth, the same heart-shaped face as Tanya’s corporately made-up mask.

“Ha ha,” Katie poked her tongue out at Tanya. “Anyway, there was wire over the pond, d’you remember, I guess to keep the frogs in, and I looked in and there were these really horrible, brown bumpy frogs. Sooo ugly. They gave me nightmares, I’ve never forgotten them. They looked just like cane toads.” Katie nodded. “Just like them”

Clementine watched as Sally’s puzzlement gave way to something harder to define. “You must have been mistaken,” she said, slowly. “We only ever had those tiny brown backyard frogs. Perhaps looking through the wire made them seem bigger than they were. You were only a child, after all. Children like to think they’ve seen monsters. William was forever telling us about the different sorts he’d found down in the bush.”

“Yes; the forbidden can take on a monstrous quality sometimes, simply because it is forbidden,” said Robbie.

“There speaketh the man from the Museum!” said Brett, holding his beer high. Robbie looked down into his glass. “Think I’ll just take a walk over to the war memorial. Look in the pool.”

“Oh Robbie, take a little something with you,” and Posie was handing him a plastic bowl of ham and turkey sandwiches, batting away an ibis with her other hand. “Shoo!” Bowl in one hand, wine glass in the other, he turned toward the shimmering rectangle of water.

Brett leant toward his wife. “Don’t worry, Sals, I already had it out with Katie, told her it was impossible.”

What was that look that Sally gave Brett? Just like in the videos she’d watched
in training, Clementine saw it flash across Sally’s face in a microsecond and then it was
gone, with no trace that it had ever been. From where Clementine sat, the angle of
Sally’s face distorted what she was seeing. Contempt? Anger? Incredulity? Perhaps
even shock? But the corresponding look from Brett was easier to define. It was
composed of two emotions: urgency and fear. Sally looked away from Brett.

“Impossible is certainly the right word,” said Sally. “But how nasty for you to
have had that fright, Katie! I don’t remember it, though.”

“Well, I didn’t say anything to you or Tan at the time,” said Katie. “Because I’d
sneaked out, you know. But they looked just like the posters. Just like them.”

“Memory can be so deceitful, can’t it,” said Sally, smiling. But there was
something in that smile that reminded Clementine of — what? No, it was gone.

“Maybe,” said Katie. “But why would I remember something that was never
there? I told Bruce about it.” She flushed slightly, defiantly, looking at her sister. “I
knew he wouldn’t yell at me for being near the pond.”

“And?” said Tanya. “Don’t tell me — he made out he believed you, to indulge
you. That husband of mine would’ve done anything for you.”

“He told me he’d seen Sally making them into a tasty soup,” said Katie. “He
said they were very nutritious and it was just like eating rabbit.” She rolled her eyes. “I
didn’t believe him, of course I didn’t. I mean, I knew he was always pulling my leg.
And anyway, we never ate rabbit.”

“We didn’t but Bruce used to as a child, his whole family lived on the rabbits
they shot when he was a boy, to listen to him,” said Tanya. “He was full of fantastic
tales.”

“Are you sure you never brought any cane toads home?” Katie’s lower lip
pouted. “Bruce definitely told me he’d seen them. Though I guess he might be joking
about the soup.”

“I did bring a few home, once,” said Brett, slowly. “I’d forgotten. And Bruce
did see them, he was over for a drink. But it was only overnight.”

“They certainly were never in our frog pond. And those toads have had enough
of our time today, I think,” said Sally, smoothly. She turned to Clementine. “So how do
you two know each other? I mean, your police friend?”
“Through work,” said Clementine.
“You’re with NSW Police?”
“No.” Not with any police at all any more, and I never will be again. For the first time, Clementine heard herself think the words clearly.
“But you know how the system works.” It was a statement rather than a question. Clementine thought she could see where this was heading.
“If you’re talking about investigations, then yes, sure, I know the process.”
“Investigations into missing animals or missing people?” Tanya brandished her champagne and Brett laughed.
“Go away, Brett, go and talk to Robbie about cane toads or something,” said Sally, turning her back on Brett. “Go and look after him, at any rate. Us girls are going to talk about things you don’t want to hear about now.”
“I might want to hear,” said Brett, but he grabbed some more ham sandwiches then stood up and started walking across the grass to the Pool of Remembrance. A couple of ibis trotted after him.
Hugh grabbed Katie, who Clementine thought was looking a tad sulky since the cane toad story had been squashed. “Look out, bee!” He swatted at it, and it lay dead, squashed on the picnic rug. “Aunty Posie, we’re going for a walk. All these cakes, the bees’ll be crazy for them. Look, there’s another one.”
“Great idea, Katie, you get away from those bees. I forgot to bring your epi pen,” said Tanya, fumbling in her handbag. “I don’t suppose you remembered.”
“Tan! Don’t worry about it. When have I ever been stung?” But Katie was following Hugh, away from the cakes and the potential source of danger.

#

“The problem was Hugh,” said Tanya, dragging the picnic rug closer to Clementine.
“Look out, the sausage rolls!” Sally whisked them out of danger.
“Thank you, dear. If I might just take a couple, no, Minnie don’t get up, here
you are,” Posie leant over to the card table of food from her chair and squirted some sauce onto the plate. “Do you mind, dear?” She gave the plate to Clementine who obediently walked it over to where Minnie sat.

“Sally, how is dear William?” said Posie. “Have you heard from him in his travels lately?”

“He’s having a wonderful time, he’s in England now,” said Sally. “Talking of staying there a few months.” She looked at Clementine. “My son, Brett’s and mine. He’s the same age as Hugh. Ella and I planned to have them at the same time.”

Tanya stretched her arms out behind her, leaning back on her hands. “She would never have left Hugh. Never. We all knew straight away that something was terribly wrong for her not to come home that day.”

Posie nodded. “Oh dear, yes. But the police fiddled and faddled around, they suggested all sorts of absurdities. Look out for the ants, dear, they may crawl up your legs.” She shook some pastry crumbs to the ground and the ibis closed in. Posie batted at them with a paper plate.

“The police were doing their job, Posie.” Minerva’s tone was decisive as she peered at the ground. Clementine thought that her chances of seeing ants in the grass were pretty low.

“Here, why don’t you put your feet on the esky, that’ll save you from the ants,” she said, hefting one esky over to Minerva, then the other to Posie.

“Thank you, dear. Job or not, it was quite ridiculous to think that our Eleanora would have walked out on her family. She would never have left us to suffer in such a way.” Posie spread a scone liberally with cream.

“But the police didn’t know her like we do.” Minerva looked quite comfortable now, feet on the esky.

Posie shook a spoonful of jam on top. “And the way they treated Robbie! Like a criminal! Searching his house, suggesting he might be hiding something from them. For a man of understanding, that Inspector often behaved as though he had none.” She sat up very straight, brandishing the scone.

“Minnie’s right, Posie, they were just doing their job,” soothed Sally. “They didn’t mean anything against Robbie. Or Ella.” She turned to Clementine.
“So nice for you to have another friend in Sydney, especially while Emily’s not here,” said Sally. “Does she live close by?”

“Sort of,” said Clementine.

“Only — I wanted to invite you round to my place, mine and Brett’s tonight. I told Emily I would. Tanya’s coming. After this — shock we’ve had, I really don’t want to be alone tonight. And — dwell on things.” Sally’s eyes opened wide, pleading with Clementine to empathise.

Bart’s eyes had been the same size, the same blue. Clementine felt stiff, awkward. “Well, that’s very kind, but actually I won’t be on my own. Benita will be coming to stay with me for a while. Just till Emily gets back. With another friend, too,” said Clementine, hurriedly.

“Oh, you’d all be welcome, of course,” said Sally. “I did promise Emily I’d look after you.”

“I’ll definitely be there,” said Tanya. “It’ll be fun.”

“Thanks very much for the invite, it’s very kind of you,” said Clementine, sighing inwardly. She noticed that Hugh and Katie had returned to the outer edge of the circle, obviously looking for some more of the picnic lunch and she edged toward them, away from Tanya and Sally. Lily slid down against the trunk of a tree and opened a book, apparently lost to the world.

“Sally, I re-read your novel last week. I meant to tell you, I so enjoyed it yet again,” said Posie. “Very dark, as they say. But so lively, so true to what people are like! The picture you gave us of that teacher! Just like an adult who really dislikes children would behave. And the chilling way that child just … disposed of that other boy. So clever. I was so disappointed that you’ve never written another.”

Sally laughed and swung her hair back over her shoulders. “Oh, I’m definitely a one-book wonder. That type of book, anyway. One was more than enough! And besides, with Ella gone … It wouldn’t be any fun without her. It was something we did together, writing, something she pushed me to do.”

“Such a shame for you to stop. She wouldn’t have wanted that,” said Posie, fingers tapping as she eyed the scones. “Room for just one more, I think.”

Sally shook her head and her hair fell over her face. “It just isn’t something I
wanted to do on my own.”

Posie bit into her scone. “Do you remember Mario, that little boy who died in that dreadful accident when you were at school?”

“Of course,” said Sally, frowning. “It’s not the kind of thing you forget. Ella and I were both guests at the party.”

“Drowned,” said Posie, shaking her head. “Quite terrible, he fell off a pleasure boat into a lake at a birthday party. I still remember Ella coming home, how distressed she was, how she could hardly speak of it.” Posie motioned the scones toward Clementine. “The little boy had been such a particular friend. She never liked going to birthday parties after that.”

“Who would!” said Tanya, shivering.

“It was awful,” said Sally. “Can we talk about something else, Posie?”

“Certainly, dear. I am sorry to have mentioned it, it just came to my mind because I bumped into his mother the other day. We had quite a chat, about you children. As you used to be.” Posie sighed. “And now you are all grown up and a published author and artist!”

“An artist, yes. I wouldn’t be calling myself a writer these days,” said Sally, a little shortly. Clementine thought she was still, understandably, upset by being reminded of the tragic party. It must have been traumatic for a child, and even now, all these years later, who knew what feelings might still be there.

“I would have thought that once you got going it was … easy to keep going on the same theme,” said Minerva. Clementine thought Sally looked cross, and with reason. These two old ladies didn’t know when to give it a rest. She wished she could follow the example of Hugh and Katie, who’d taken some food and gone again. The sausage rolls were excellent.

Sally shrugged, pushing her hair out of her eyes. “Maybe for some!” She looked at Clementine. “Really, I just had a fantastic bit of luck that took me in another direction. Through the novel, actually; it put me in with the right crowd. Way back when, when vampires were really taking off, around the fin de siecle, as they say, I got a couple of contracts for merchandise design.”

“Enough to keep her very much in the black,” said Tanya, licking the cream
knife.

Sally laughed. “And then, with everything all over the internet, I got known. Result: I’ve had lots and lots of practice at drawing bats. Not to mention cats, and rats and toads. And all manner of other things slimy and squishy and generally representing the dark side.” She laughed again. “I’m gothic every which way and loose.”

“Don’t be fooled by such self-deprecation, she’s bloody good at what she does,” said Tanya, biting into a scone. “Some of us have to work for a living, others just invent themselves on the internet.”

“Invention itself isn’t difficult,” said Sally. “It’s inventing the right thing that’s not so easy. The thing that people will believe, in the context of all the other things that you’ve invented. I have to keep really careful track of what I’ve done in the past.” She laughed, seemingly restored to good humour. “But back to tonight. I hope you and your friends can come, Clementine.”

#

There were quite a few people standing or sitting around the long rectangular pool. Robbie thought it worked best like this, on a sunny day on a weekend, when there was a bit of a crowd. Sometimes, especially when she’d first gone missing, he’d come here on a weekday and tried to calm himself by looking into the pool and remembering the walks they taken in this park, the times they’d stood together and looked into the pool. The times they’d been the only two standing there on blustery days, joking about how if they jumped in at the right moment, jumped into the right part of the pool, they might find themselves in another life, another part of their own life, the other way the crossroads had pointed.

“Which was?” Robbie had asked, pulling her closer.

“You know, the way where my stories made us money and you stayed at home with Hugh,” she’d said, pouting. “Or, the way where we didn’t accidentally have a baby practically straight away. The way where we had time — and money! — to travel, just the two of us.”

Robbie had looked at her, stricken with anxiety and doubt. “Really?” What he’d
meant was, are you really saying that was what you wanted?

She’d seen that look, punched him gently. “Of course not, silly billy! I wouldn’t have had anything happen differently. You’re my happy ever after and Hugh is the icing on the cake.”

A shadow cut across his contemplation, souring his mood instantly. Was there no getting away?

Brett sat down heavily. “Women’ve told me to get lost. You know how it is.”

No, thought Robbie, but he put some more wine in his mouth instead of opening it to say the wrong thing.

“Katie going on about that cane toad thing again. Bringing Bruce into it. Thought Sally was ready to throttle her.” Brett laughed nervously, winced. “Seems to have given me indigestion. Now, I reckon they’re having some big pow-wow about Ella, telling that friend of Emily’s about her. Talking about that article in the paper.”

He crammed a sandwich into his mouth.

Robbie stood up and walked over to the pool. He stood right on the edge, toes hanging out over the water.

But Brett was there, too, hovering behind him. “You don’t think it could be her, do you Rob?”

Robbie wondered how easy it would be to push Brett into the water.

“Rob?” Brett’s voice was pleading, uncertain.

The surge of anger was out of Robbie’s control. “Don’t be an ass,” he said. He heard Brett’s gasp.

“Sorry, I only — I thought maybe that the police knew something and they’d told you what it was.”

And how is it any of yours if they did, thought Robbie. But then the anger left him, and left him depleted, as quickly as it had come. Being nasty to Brett wouldn’t make it not be Ella in that cave. And Brett had known Ella, known her well, for years, anyway. Maybe they’d even been close, in Brett’s eyes. And anyway, as Ella always said: “He’s Sally’s husband, Robbie. Be nice!”

“Pop over later, for a drink? Only if you’d like,” said Brett, hastily. “Sally’s inviting Clementine and her friend.”
“Thanks, I’ll think about it,” said Robbie. But he knew he wouldn’t go to Brett and Sally’s. He’d already made his plans for Saturday night.

#

Clementine helped stash and trash the remains of the picnic.

“Brett and Robbie can carry this lot.” Tanya shook out a picnic blanket while Sally stacked empty containers and organised remaining foodstuffs. “Posie, I’d like Sal to come with me and pop in on a friend who’s not well, but only if you’ll be able to manage getting back?”

“Of course I can dear, I catch the train every week. Besides, I won’t be by myself. There are all these nice young people to assist me,” said Posie, beaming at Clementine and looking over at Hugh and Katie.

Tanya looked at her watch. “Yikes! We’d better get going Sals, or you’ll — we’ll be too late.”

Sally looked at her watch too. She raised her head and her voice. “Brett!”

Clementine noticed that Brett came running straight away.

“This has to go in the fridge, take this round to Posie’s. I’ll be back by six, guests are coming about seven thirty.” Sally gave him a peck on the cheek and then she and Tanya waved goodbye.

Clementine watched them cross Park Street and head along the ferny path toward the fountain. They were quite a distance away, so she couldn’t be sure, but it looked like Tanya stepped onto the grass and set off in the direction of the shops with a wave, while Sally stuck to the path.

#

By the time they bundled up to leave, Posie felt quite tired. Talking about things was always interesting but increasingly she found that she needed to rest after a gathering. After bible study last week she had had to lie down for a good two hours, although admittedly she had been most annoyed with Wilma, going on like that about
minority groups. Posie had been very pleased with herself for using the politically correct terminology. Wilma had probably never heard it before, which was perhaps why she had shut up. As Posie got older she most definitely got less tolerant, especially of small-mindedness in ‘old’ people. They were only the same age as her so why should their narrow-minded prejudices be excused on the basis of their age? But there was a price to pay; she was sure her blood pressure had gone up and stayed there for hours. So dangerous.

And today, perhaps, she had rather over-indulged. Quite greedy, she had been. It would serve her right if she suffered later. There were some things about becoming older that Posie found very tiresome indeed and the modifications that one had to make in relation to food was one of the most tedious. The talk of Ella had upset her, the possibility that she might have been lying in a cave so close to home all these years! Lying in a cave anywhere. Dear Ella, how she hated confined spaces.

Posie was quite relieved there were to be less talkers on the way home, Sally and Tanya had so much energy for discussion of matters that Posie was not sure she wanted to discuss. Although she herself had been guilty of trying to stir some pigeons, metaphorical, not literal, ones today. The literal ones stirred wherever you looked in the city. It seemed a waste of this lovely day and this lovely park to not focus on the beauty all around them — though perhaps not the ibis or the pigeons — if only for a short time. Posie determined to do so in the minutes remaining. Minnie seemed to be walking as briskly as usual, despite having eaten so many sausage rolls, not to mention mini quiches. But then, nothing much affected Minnie. That was just the way she was. Posie paused to adjust the strap of her handbag. She had draped it across her body as instructed by the nice policeman yesterday but it was pressing in just the wrong place. Another tiresome thing, though perhaps not so much related to being old. All the young women walking seemed to have a bag slung across their body. Many of the young men, too. Perhaps they were all fearful of attacks. Perhaps this part of the city was especially dangerous. It was called Hyde Park after all. In Posie’s mind that begged the question: Where was Jekyll?

“Are you alright, Posie?” That little friend of Emily’s, now what was her name, something from the movies, a flower name? Ah, no a fruit.
“I am quite fine, thank you Clementine. What a pretty name you have, my dear. And so unusual.” Posie wondered if she was part-Spanish. Clementina, perhaps, was her real name. She was certainly a girl with what Posie’s father called exotic looks. But now they were walking past the magician, and Clementine had stopped, was talking to him.

“Oh, how nice to meet a magician,” said Posie. “It takes me back to my youth.”

Peter stared. “It’s nice to meet you too.” Could it be? Surely not. Sydney wasn’t that small a place. But her voice was awfully familiar. Better to say or not? How could it hurt him — he could only be wrong. “In fact — I think we may have met before. Near Town Hall yesterday.” He doffed his hat and bowed.

Posie clasped her hands. “Oh how wonderful! This is really an answer to prayer. Now I have a chance to thank you properly. Clementine, dear, could you pass over that basket, please?”

“Minnie, Minnie, come here!” Posie peeled off the tea-towel. “I’m sure this must be hungry work, standing here. Clementine, dear, this young man saved me from a very nasty fall yesterday. Some nasty young thugs made an attempt to snatch my handbag.”

“Posie! Were you at the police station yesterday?” said Clementine, staring. “I thought you looked familiar.”

“Everyone looks different in different clothes,” said Posie, nodding. “That was a favourite saying of my father’s. Similar to don’t judge a book by its cover but I think that Daddy preferred the clothing analogy because of The Depression. His youth, you see.” She patted the young man’s hand. “This is what one calls a serendipitous meeting, young man. That and the fact that you are friend of Clementine, who is in turn a friend of a friend of mine.” She patted Clementine’s hand too. “And in fact, my dear, I have just realised who you are. You are the little friend of Emily’s who holidayed with her and her grandmother, my dear friend Grace, when you were at school. Clemmy, we called you.”

“So you did.” Clementine smiled. An memory came back to her, a happy memory of a dog licking cream off the floor in Posie’s kitchen while Emily and Clementine licked icing sugar and cream from butterfly cakes.
“Serendipitous, that’s exactly what I was thinking too,” said Peter, solemnly.

“Actually,” said Clementine, “Peter may come and stay a few days at Emily’s with Benny and myself.”

“Peter will,” said Peter, promptly. It never rained but it poured; very apt and his luck was really turning at last. He’d been more than pleased to see Benita again. “Hello stranger,” he’d said. “Need any help with anything, I’m your man.” He’d tried to show he meant it in his eyes. She’d mentioned her friend’s offer, but until it came from the horse he’d been hard pressed to believe it could be true. It’d been instructive watching the group from his vantage point as entertainer. Girls settling in to have a chat, boys off on their own with a drink, young love prowling round, probably looking for a tree to sit under and snog, or whatever they called it now. Then, those two, the wife and friend, taking off together, the friend careering off the path just before the fountain. If only he could hear as well as see he’d have really been in clover. But this!

This invitation was the stuff dreams were made of. His story would definitely have that authentic insider flavour now. And all of them, all these people — they thought he was friends with Clementine, who, if he had understood her correctly last night, hardly knew them. So how were they to know he wasn’t an old, old friend? Perfect.

#

Saturday evening, Robbie sat on the couch in his study. The wardrobe doors were wide open and a half-drunk glass of wine was beside him. He weighed the orange cardboard folder in his hands. The conversation about the thylacine had reminded him of something he had been meaning to do for a long time. He opened the folder and drew out the thin sheaf of paper. The printed sheets weren’t really necessary, he knew what was written on them off by heart. But it gave him pleasure to hold in his hand the same pages that she had held in hers, to think of them both reading the pages together. He opened the sliding door and settled back on the lounge, conscious of the beady eyes looking out at him from the cupboard.
The Unhappy Ending of the Thylacine — or, How the Thylacine Came To Be — Lost. (Just So You Know!)

In the beginning of the wide, wild world, before there was a name for a place that today we call Australia, there was a curious and handsome creature, O Best Beloved. This creature had the head of a wolf and the stripes of a tiger and roamed stealthily through the forests of the island in abundance. The Tiger Wolf was naturally suited to its island home. It was a wily hunter and a swift killer; its stripes gave it camouflage in the depths of the forest and its strong jaws gave it merciful savagery in its slaying of the beasts it ate for food. For many years this Tiger Wolf was able to range freely, killing, when it must, for food, sharing the land with dark-coloured Men who also ranged freely in this land without a name, killing, when they must, for food. Then came a new creature, a pale-coloured, pink-faced creature also called a Man, bigger than the Tiger Wolf but not so well adapted for the land. This White Man brought with him soft-bodied sweet-smelling sheep, fat, furry, four-legged creatures, creatures that smelled delicious to the Tiger Wolf. These sweet-smelling sheep had pasture cleared for them by the White Man so that they could eat grass.

Sometimes the White Man looked very like the Dark Man with whom the Tiger Wolf had shared the land for so many years (apart from his pale colour, of course). But at other times White Man became a strange looking beast with three arms. One of the arms, usually the darkest coloured one, was longer and thinner than the others, and sometimes this arm made a very loud bang. The Tiger Wolf was curious about the bang noise, curious but cautious. It stayed a safe distance away and watched as the two-legged White Man poked and patted its long thin arm. The Tiger Wolf flattened itself against the ground and the long brown grass (for this was a time of drought in the Island, O Best Beloved).

The contract between the Tiger Wolf and the White Man came about thus: The Tiger Wolf determined that the White Man could use the land for these sweet-smelling animals if the creature would allow the Tiger Wolf some of the soft-bodied sweet-smelling sheep for his dinner, which, as we all know, Best Beloved, is the highlight of every Tiger Wolf’s day. But the contract was broken by one of the parties.
It was unfinished, as they all were. The Just-So Stories had been favourites of them both. Ella said the drawings were what first made her want to draw herself. Her animals were creatures of boldness or whimsy, depending. On her mood, on the subject matter, on the story she was working on at the time. Just So We All Know! The seed had been planted on the holiday they had taken a few months before Lily was born. Hugh had been nine and Tasmania had opened up a wonder world for him. He had always drawn but it was after that trip that he had become obsessive, about colour, about shape, about pursuing his inner vision.

Ella had started these stories, he could still hear her, speaking with such passion about settlement and the fate of the thylacine. Robbie didn’t expect, really, that there would be an end to them — the subject matter was the original never ending story. As fast as he wrote one vignette another occurred to him. And they took so long to take shape before he put them down on paper.

He took his wineglass in hand. What made him really happy was how clearly he could hear her voice, her quickness, her musical breathing, her excitement in being alive. Perhaps that was why his own project had stalled; the project they were writing together. He looked at the animals staring out at him from the cupboard. How the Tree Kangaroo ceased to be. How the Stick Nest Rat became Less and Less Once upon a time, oh Best Beloved, there was a cave in Western Australia that was a sanctuary. Where to from there? How the Paradise Parrot made it into Paradise. He was no writer, really. Not of this kind of story. What he did was collect, collate and analyse; and now, protect. Where he could. But sometimes it felt like he couldn’t do anything. Nothing at all. Robbie gulped down the wine and shut the folder. It had been a long, distressing day. He was exhausted. Maybe things would look better in the morning.

#

Part of Clementine didn’t even want to mention Sally’s invitation. She thought longingly of an early night. But she knew Benita would be keen.

“A chance for gossip about Ella Ravell? With people who really knew her?
When do we go?” Benita presented her luggage with a flourish.

Peter had been quick to take up the invitation to stay and was happily ensconced with a cup of tea in the kitchen. “Wherever you go, I follow willingly,” he said.

Great.

So twilight saw the three of them walking over to Brett and Sally’s. Clementine scuffed her sneakers on the bitumen to avoid the muddy verge. The houses and gardens they passed were a blur. She was overwhelmed by colour, by all the growth after the rain, even in this light. The glistening medley of greens, especially, played with her vision, leaving her searching for some relief.

Which was maybe why she saw it. The handkerchief-size white patch poking out of the hedge. Right next to Tanya, waving at them from the top of the driveway, with a half full champagne glass.

“Great to see you guys could make it,” Tanya’s smile included all of them, settled on Peter. Shifted when Clementine bent down and reached into the privet.

Even before she pulled it out her heart was beating far out of proportion to the walk and she was wishing that she hadn’t come.

The others stared as Clementine held up the envelope.

“I saw it from up the street,” she said, almost apologetically.

“That’s some eyesight,” said Peter.

“Of course you did,” said Benita.

“Posie’s writing,” said Tanya, peering. “For Sally. But it’s not her birthday or anything.” She reached out and took the envelope. “This way.”

She led them into a dimly lit lobby. “Hey Sals, gang’s all here!” Tanya waved the envelope at her. “Surprise! But it’s not your birthday!”

Sally smiled wistfully, meaningfully, thought Clementine, at all of them. “It’s — an anniversary card. I thought I’d lost it.”

“How many years?” said Clementine, smiling back as Sally’s gaze met hers.

“Shit!” said Tanya. “Darling!”

Sally laughed, but it was a laugh without humour. “Ten years,” she said, looking at Tanya. Her voice broke.

“Oh, shit,” said Tanya, again, sculling the wine in her glass and throwing her
arms around Sally. “What an idiot I am, Sal. I’m so sorry.”

“We should go,” said Clementine quietly, to Benita. “This is private.” And dark. A card, an anniversary, tears, choked laughter that could have been a sob … A private horror story. She wanted to get away. “Let’s go, Ben.” She turned and walked out the door and back up the driveway … And bumped into Brett and the retriever coming down.

“Hey, you’re not leaving already!” He caught lightly at her arm and she smelt the faint tang of alcohol.

“I think this is no time for strangers,” said Clementine.

“A stranger is just what we want,” said Brett. “Several strangers. I don’t want to be alone. Please.”

But you aren’t alone, thought Clementine. She opened her mouth to say as much, but Benita was at her other elbow, touching it lightly.

“We don’t want to have to talk about it,” Brett said. “Please, I’m begging you. Clem.” She saw his face contort. He looked like a man in pain. “Please stay, we’ll have fun.”

“I can’t,” said Clementine. “I’m sorry but I can’t.” At least, she wanted to say that, she opened her mouth to say it. But then she felt Benita’s hand on her arm.

“Okay,” she said. “We’ll stay.”

Brett’s gratefulness was almost embarrassing. “It’s just, it’s too much, with thinking about Ella today as well. Sally and her were best buddies since primary school, you know.”

Clementine didn’t ask about the “as well”.

Brett walked them back in the door, where Sally was the centre of both Tanya and Peter’s attention. Peter’s arm went round Sally as she led the way to the kitchen and through to a lounge-cum-deck which looked out over the bush, giving the impression that they were surrounded by wilderness rather than by suburban homes. Clementine found the room a little creepy. The decor was tasteful, if you liked that kind of thing. White leather lounges, red and white rugs. It was the frieze of bats along the wall and the ornaments that seemed to cover every available space that gave her a slightly off feeling.
Tanya brandished a small marble cat. Clementine thought it an ugly creature, black with a somewhat sinister cast to its mouth. “It’s tradition now,” she said. “From when Sally won the competition. I give her cats, bats, toads for birthdays, Christmas, whatever. All the traditional familiars.”

The night passed in a blur after that. The flatness that came after the adrenalin spike set in and Clementine could only remember fragments of it later. But some things stood out. Like Brett’s drinking. His inappropriate comments and behaviour. Sally’s attempts to reduce the impact of Brett. Tanya’s theories of relationships. Peter’s easy sociability and his ability to get people talking. The polite attempts of neighbours and of friends of Sally’s that Clementine didn’t know, but recognised from the exhibition, to include her in conversation. But she was too tired and fraught for much conversation with strangers. She smiled at them all and placed herself out of easy reach, sitting between Benny and a wall on one of the white lounges.

“Great deck area,” said Benny, pointing. “Be fantastic for a pool.”

“Shhh!” said Tanya anxiously, actually putting a finger to her lips.

But Sally was there, handing round a plate of food. “We did have a pool. I made Brett fill it in.” She smiled graciously. “Mini quiche?”

Clementine felt queasiness welling again. She tried to block it out by listening in to the conversation.

“I used to think big,” Brett was saying to Peter “But now — I’m very grateful if things go along and nothing much happens. Especially nothing much bad. Age does that to you. Age, and realising that expectations are there to be changed, not met.”

“Goodness,” said Benny. “That’s quite — ”

“True,” said Clementine, before she could stop herself.

“Oh, Brett! Stop the philosophizing, you’ll bore everyone to sleep!” exclaimed Sally, proffering a plate. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and pour drinks or something, darling.” She smiled at Clementine. “You must try these, asparagus, salmon and cheese, one of Posie’s recipes.” Brett grinned awkwardly and shuffled off down the hall towards the back verandah. Sally left the plate on a table and followed him. Soon, their raised voices could be heard on the verandah.

“Well,” said Clementine, breaching the awkward silence. “That’s a well-suited
“Extremely,” said Tanya. “He makes money, she spends it, it’s a very equalising relationship.” She laughed and waved her glass of champagne about. She seemed to glitter in the moonlight. Clementine rubbed her eyes, but the silvery sheen didn’t disappear.

“Well, I got the impression that Sally made quite a bit too,” said Peter. Clementine caught Benny’s eye, challenging her friend not to laugh at such an unexpected utterance. Benita turned it into a cough, then said, “How awful for you. What did he eat?”

Tanya ignored Benita and leaned even closer to Peter. “His last supper. Here, in this very house!”

Peter held out a vol-au-vent in front of him. “Think I’ve just lost my appetite.”

“Not really, but just about.” Tanya was laughing now, sitting up and calling out to Sally, who came armed with a champagne bottle. “Sals, I was just remembering Brucie, how much he used to love your cooking.”

“Oh, yes, didn’t he just,” said Sally, squeezing in cosily next to Peter.

“He was a pig, really,” said Tanya. “A seriously obese one.” She gulped her champagne and lolled back into the white leather, holding her glass out for more.

“Thank you. I was just saying how he died from it.” She nodded her head. “It’s true, the doctor just rolled his eyes and said, I warned him, I told him he had to lose weight, that he needed to exercise. I mean, it shouldn’t have been a shock at all, he was years older than me and everything. But still — he always seemed so alive, he was always so reliable, so there.” Her eyes filled with tears. “He said I was mean to him. But he
shouldn’t have been such a pig. It was disgusting.” She took a big swallow of champagne.

Oh oh, thought Clementine, let’s get this party started. She smiled at Sally and said the first thing that came into her head, thinking to change the subject. “How’s your sick friend?”

The question fell into a silence.

Clementine was conscious of Sally tensing, frowning for a second, then turning to include Tanya. “Alana. She’s — they don’t know how long she’s got, do they?”

Tanya wiped her eyes. “No, it could be anytime. We couldn’t stay long today so we’re going back in tomorrow.”

Great. Another conversation stopper. Fortunately, somebody turned the music up then. Clementine leant back into the soft leather and closed her eyes, willing the evening to be over. She was vaguely aware of Tanya giggling, saying “Don’t go away! I’ll be back soon,” and of Peter and Sally settling back into the lounge. From what she could hear, Peter was the all-time nosy parker, though Sally didn’t seem to mind. The more she heard, the more Clementine wished she was out of there. By the time the conversation moved onto Ella Ravell, Benita had joined in. The last thing Clementine heard was Sally saying, “I went to primary school with Ella and we stayed friends.” After that, she knew nothing till Benita poked her in the ribs and said it was time to go.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN
Into That Darkness Peering

Peter woke gasping for air around 2am. Margaret was calling him again. He sat up, legs over the side of the bed, ready to run to the rescue, before he realised where he was. Before he registered the thunder, the howling wind, the attack on the window pane … The water splatting through the open window. He slammed it shut and mopped up the puddle on the sill with his shirt. He grabbed the towel from the back of the door and rubbed it at the carpet, working in the dark. When he was satisfied he’d done all he could, he draped the towel over the door handle and lay down again. For sure he’d be awake till morning now.

But when he shut his eyes he didn’t open them again till dawn, woken by kookaburras laughing and the swelling of a magpie chorus. He lay listening to the birds for some minutes, revelling in the presence of their sound and the absence of another, the traffic. This was more like it. If only he could stay here a while, he might begin to get on top of things. He rolled out of bed and pulled on his clothes, checked his bag for water and a camera. He looked into the kitchen — empty of people, he was clearly the only one awake — and took a banana from the fruitbowl. He let himself out the front door as quietly as he could.

His rubber soles were almost noiseless, but the rain had created a muddy sludge of twigs and leaves and branches that sucked at his steps on the verge. He moved onto the asphalt. No cars around, he’d hear them coming from miles away at this time of the morning. Those birds were singing fit to bust, but no people anywhere. A scruffy dog sniffing and peeing in somebody’s garden, but that was it. You could see the bush everywhere on all sides lounging, lunging over roofs of houses, the trees springing forth from flat lands and gullies crowded with swaying trunks and branches. The houses spoke to him of opulence and individualism with their verandahs, double stories or extensive sprawl across their quarter acre blocks. There was no uniformity in their design. There were Spanish style white brick, clinker bricks that reminded him of calico cats, reliable dark brown house bricks. But mainly what he noticed was the way the
architecture blended into the landscape. There were very few mown lawns that he could see and no fences out the front. Most homes stood open to the street, inviting. Riots of plants that he mostly didn’t know the names of burst out of oddly shaped rockeries or simply grew as nature planned in the spaces people now called home.

From what they were saying yesterday, that poor woman must have been found in a cave around here somewhere. That might be an angle he could consider, the story would have more legs if he could somehow, however tenuously, make a connection between this body in a cave and his current situation.

Before he’d gone more than ten minutes he came to a track that led down into the gully. Peter stopped, considered. Why not? He stepped onto the path, treading slowly, keen to sidestep the worst of the mud that bore witness to nature’s rampage in the night. Following it downward he breathed the air in deeply, relishing the unfamiliar plant smells. There were patchy trails leading off the narrow main path to the left and to the right, well-worn tracks. Peter ignored them in favour of the single-file track, which grew narrower as it descended into the valley and out of the sun. The gums grew taller here, and more densely. There was more shadow than sunshine. The birds paused in their greeting. He shivered, feeling the morning chill and the silence closing in around him. “Hello?” he called. But nothing echoed back.

Then the silence exploded. It sounded like a shot. Peter dropped to the ground. He lay perfectly still, let his eyes flick from side to side, searching for the danger. He thought of the body hidden in the cave all those years. He thought of Margaret.

Seconds, or perhaps minutes, passed. A bird sang, a full-throated eerie call that Peter didn’t recognise. Peter scrambled to his feet and ran uphill, stumbling over rocks and sandstone shards and boulders. He cursed, and kept running. He hit the street and his big toe simultaneously, and cursed again. A woman walking a dog hurried past him without raising her head.

He jogged quickly back to the house, not bothering to avoid the mud. Too late for that now.

There was an old-fashioned garden bench pressed into a bush out the front. Feeling unpleasantly moist and dirty, Peter sat on the damp mossy wood and ate his banana. The bananas here were really good. When a light drizzle started he went
inside and had a shower. There was still nobody else up. He put his jeans on and lay on the bed in his room, thinking. A mobile rang in another room and he looked at his watch, surprised. 7.30 Sunday morning. Hm. He heard a sleep-weary voice answer, then the timbre of that voice change as the owner woke up fast. Peter could almost feel the adrenalin rush through his own veins. Then he heard some thuds and shuffles. Someone was clearly getting out of bed and getting dressed. Peter walked quietly to the kitchen and put water in the kettle. Turned it on. Toast in the toaster. Butter, jam, vegemite out of the fridge. Plates out of the cupboard. He was ready when she came round the corner. She looked surprised.

“Hi,” said Benita. “Got to work.”

“I heard the phone,” said Peter. “Toast?” He’d found that food often brought forth confidences.

“That’d be great, thanks,” said Benita.

The toaster popped, and Peter grabbed it, put it on a plate, pushed butter, jam, vegemite across to her.

“Have this one,” he said, like he was giving it up. He watched her slather butter and then jam.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. She looked at him. “It’s not even 8 on Sunday morning. What do you think?”

“Not okay,” said Peter. “In fact, somebody’s worst nightmare.”

“Yep,” said Benita. “That’s it alright. And guess who gets to knock at their door and tell them the news?”

#

Sunday morning Robbie woke early. He heard a magpie’s voice soaring in anticipation of the new day. He kept his eyes closed against it, stretching experimentally, testing for feeling in all his limbs. Yawned, hearing the sound emerge as a groan. Perhaps he was still sleeping and the previous day had been a nightmare.

The parrot sensed that Robbie was awake, or perhaps the magpie set him off; he
began a squawking imitation of the magpie song. A kookaburra cut into the chorus, quickly dominating with its ascending cackle. Robbie scrunched his knees up to his chest and rolled over, opening his eyes to look toward the window. Ella would have been out of bed and looking out at the rain by now. She would have been pottering around the room, deciding what to do with the day. Chattering about the rain, about the birds, about how the strength of their singing indicated how happy they were today because of the rain, with the abundance of worms that it would bring. Worms. Fat ones, skinny ones, long ones, short ones. That was how the song went. It was one of the ones she had sung when they inspected the garden for damage after the worst of storms. *Bite their heads off, suck their guts out, throw their skins away.* An all-you-can-eat buffet for birds, that was what a few rainy days meant in nature.

More early birds had joined the chorus, and Raver was whistling now. Maybe he saw himself as one of the pack, enjoyed being part of a flock for a short while. He was gregarious by nature. Ella had rescued him from the RSPCA. “I never would have gone looking for a parrot myself, of course not,” she’d said, horrified, when Robbie had tried to solve the mystery of why someone as passionate about wildlife as Ella had that terrible thing, a caged wild bird. An *illegal* caged wild bird. “But he must have been somebody’s pet — he looked at me so pleadingly poor boy, I couldn’t leave him there.”

Raver didn’t eat worms, anyway, only bird-seed, fruit, vegetables and the occasional egg or piece of cheese or yoghurt, for which Robbie was grateful. He’d tried a snail once when it trailed into his cage but he hadn’t seemed to like it. Would a baby cane toad be poisonous to Raver? Perhaps, although most birds didn’t seem to be affected by them.

Robbie sighed, yawned and rocked himself out of bed. He brought Raver inside and took him out of the cage.

“Toast and tea, just for me.” The parrot cocked its head on one side.

“I’ll share some of mine with you,” said Robbie. “Soon as I get dressed.” Raver hopped onto the bedside chair and began pecking at the worn threads of the tassel on Robbie’s dressing gown. “Hey!” said Robbie, struggling into an old t-shirt. “Bad bird.” He grabbed underwear from a drawer, picked up his jeans from the floor. Tapped Raver lightly on the beak and was rewarded by a nip. “Breakfast now.”
Riki Tiki bounded out of Hugh’s room on his way upstairs. “Good dog,” said Robbie. The tail wagged harder. It was so simple to be a success with a dog.

He’d fed the dog and the cat, eaten most of two pieces of toast, drunk a cup of tea, retrieved the Sunday paper and shared a banana with the bird and the dog before the knock on the door surprised him. Raver on his shoulder, he opened it and stared at Carruthers and the young policewoman.

“Hello,” he said. And in that instant, he knew that the world had really changed.

“Please wipe your shoes,” said Raver.

“Don’t bother, that’s just a joke,” said Robbie, hurriedly, as the police looked around for a doormat.

“May we come in?” said the Superintendent.

Robbie saw the hall and the door to the kitchen glide by and then he was somehow standing by the kettle, boiling it. “Cup of tea?” he heard himself ask.

“That would be lovely.” Then he was seated at the table and Carruthers was beside him. The young policewoman made tea, somehow finding everything without asking.

“Robbie, I’m sorry to tell you that the dental records show us that the remains are definitely Eleanora’s,” said Carruthers, simply. “Please accept my sincere condolences. I am so very sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” said Robbie. “Thank you.” Thank you? Could you say anything more absurd, more macabre? He stiffened. Anger. He couldn’t cope with her anger. He looked down into the mug of tea. Raver hopped from his shoulder onto the tablecloth and poked his beak into the mug. Robbie automatically pushed him away.

“Is there anyone you’d like us to call, to come and be with you?” Robbie heard the policewoman’s voice but what did she mean? Ella was with him. Always. There wasn’t anyone else to call.

“Robbie.” Now there was a hand placed lightly on his arm, a hand that wasn’t one of his own. His own hand was tapping the tabletop.

“Now that we’ve found her, we’ll be revisiting the original investigation, doing further interviews with people, going back over information we collected at the time.”

Robbie noticed an ant was crawling along Carruthers’ collar.
“We’ll need to interview you formally again.”
Now the ant was making its way up his neck.
“You’ve got an ant on your neck. It’s heading for your ear,” said Robbie.
Carruthers brushed the ant off. Robbie followed it across the tablecloth. It would never manage that crumb, but it was trying.
“Is there anyone that you’d like us to ring? To tell about Ella?”
Robbie looked at them. They seemed comfortably settled. When would they go? Should he offer them something to eat? “I suppose … Posie … But she’s at church,” he said. “With Lily. Sunday school.”
“What about your colleague, Brett? Doesn’t he live round here too?”
“Yes. Next street.” The ant had pulled the crumb in half. “Brett and Sally. They live round the corner.”
“Why don’t we give them a call,” said Benita.
“Oh, no need to disturb them. It’s Sunday,” said Robbie. Call Brett and Sally to tell them that Ella was never coming home? It was unthinkable. Nearly as unthinkable as calling Posie.
Which he must do.
“I must tell Posie first,” he said. “And Hugh and Lily. Before anyone else.” But surely he didn’t have to tell them straight away?
“Robbie, the media will get hold of it before too much longer,” said Benita bluntly. “I’m sure you’d rather your relatives and friends knew before that happens.”
The ant was disappearing down one side of the tablecloth. Robbie closed his eyes. “You’re right,” he said. “I’ll tell Posie as soon as she comes home from church.”
As soon as they left, he took Raver downstairs. “I’m sorry,” he said as he closed the cage door on the indignant bird. “We’ll have to play later.”
“Later, traitor,” said Raver. Couldn’t resist teaching him that one!
Robbie looked in the mirror. He wouldn’t shave. The vaguely criminal cast of his five o’clock shadow seemed appropriate. Now that the police had made it official, everything looked different. Everything felt faster, more vivid, more serious and real. The lion was really inside him, not hidden in the cupboard. It was gnawing its way through his insides, hungry to get its teeth into something juicy. But where was there
any food that could assuage it?

He sat in his study for some time. There, the lion was still in its usual place, and so were the tree kangaroo and all the others. “What is there to be done?” he said. After that, he sat some more, staring into space. At some stage, he thought he heard a knock on the front door, but he ignored it.

When he eventually roused himself, he knew it was time to move on. The dream world which had sustained him, the world in which the animals were cosy in the cupboard, while he, their ardent keeper, cared for them properly — that world had vanished. The old familiar glass from ten years ago was back between him and the rest of the world. He knew that no matter how hard he screamed no-one would hear and it would be up to him to break up the clarity, to smash until spider web cracks appeared, weakening the hold of the glass.

He went and took Raver out of his cage, set him on the desk with a treat. ‘Favour Raver’ said the bird. Robbie dragged the sliding door back as far as it would go. He put *Carnival of the Animals* on, loudly. He took all his closest friends out of the cupboard and set them up in a circle. The Paradise Parrot he sat next to him on the couch. On the other side, the tree kangaroo. Round table, that was the idea, that was how to make this decision. Robbie began to cry. She was gone, really gone and now his animals would have to go too. He hadn’t finished their book, he’d barely started. There was no logic to it. The last ten years fell in on him and he sat paralysed.

How long he howled, his arm around the dog, he didn’t know. Maybe it was only five minutes, maybe an hour. After some time, a slight weight on his shoulder and a gentle peck at his ear told him Raver had joined him. The bird and dog sat quietly while he cried. Every time he opened his eyes, thinking he was finished, he seemed to see a different animal looking at him, sorrowfully, balefully, helplessly — all challenging him to do something, to be someone that he couldn’t be without her. He had been nothing, no-one before he met her and now he was a nothing who had had the centre blown out of him. Sitting in the middle of a circle full of stuffed animals, dead animals, animals that shouldn’t be here, shouldn’t be in his house, just as she shouldn’t’ve been there, shouldn’t be lying alone in that cave. Resurrection! Life after death, in all their glory. But what about Ella? The only resurrection he could offer her
was through sharing their stories, shaping them, making them come to life. And he couldn’t even do that properly.

Eventually he slid the cupboard door closed. There were practical matters to settle for his animals. It wouldn’t be safe for them here any more, with the police likely to pop around with a search warrant any time soon. He couldn’t bear to let them go but he would have to find a way to smuggle them back into the Museum. Things had been getting better there. He could try and see that they would be properly looked after. But not now, now was time to tell Posie. And Lily? What to tell them? How to tell? He looked at the photo of Ella, caught the gold weight of her smile. She would show him. He would take the dog with him, he would look as normal as he could. He put Raver back in his cage and whistled Riki Tiki.

Walking down the street to Posie’s, he saw gums flap in the wind like giant raptors. It reminded him of walking on the clifftop at Katoomba with her. She had pointed out to him how the lyrebirds ran like dinosaurs.

“Well, we don’t actually know how dinosaurs ran.” He had been in a snarky mood that day, frustrated, he remembered now, at knowing how the day was going to end. A casual dinner with other couples, Brett and Sally, Tanya and Bruce. When he wanted her all to himself. He’d been grumpy all day, letting knowledge of the future spoil the present.

“I mean, like the dinosaurs in Stephen Spielberg’s film,” Ella had said, triumphant. He felt her squeeze his arm.

If only he had treasured that present! Then he would have a golden memory of a day in the mountains. Stepping out in the outdoors, dominated by natural beauty and the joy of simply being in the company of Ella, untarnished by his own scowling and sulking.

Posie answered his knock at the door straight away. “Robbie dear! Will you stay to lunch with us?”

Robbie looked at his watch. How had that happened? It was nearly one o’clock.

“Er — I didn’t come for lunch, I — ”.

“Oh, if you’re after Lily, didn’t that naughty girl pop in and tell you? She promised she would! She went home with Christopher’s family straight from church.”
Posie smiled.

“I didn’t answer the door.” Lily was not here? Here was his chance. From a great distance, Robbie heard himself say, “Posie, I have to talk to you about Ella.”

#

Back from Posie’s, Robbie shoved the sugar bowl and the salt and pepper onto a chair and wrenched the tablecloth from the table to the floor. He grabbed the tea-towels and Hugh’s sloppy joe and bundled them together. Downstairs, into the machine. Liberal sprinkling of soap powder. Automatic setting. The familiar noise soothing.

What had Posie said? ‘Now the horror will begin. Begin again, I mean. Now that we know.’ And she had looked at him in such a way.

Robbie had not said anything.

He heard the doorknocker. Lily? “Just a minute,” he yelled.

When he saw Sally, her head on one side, her mouth showing so much of how she felt and her eyes even more, he smiled, and felt his breathing ease. “How good it is to see you,” he said.

“Robbie, is there anything I can do?” She stood quite still, propped up against the exterior wall.

“No,” he said, simply. “There is nothing anyone can do. But thank you for asking.”

He took it for granted that she would come in, stepping back and holding the door open for her.

They walked into the kitchen and he automatically turned on the tap and put water in the kettle, knowing she would sit at the end of the table near the window, waiting for her to comment on the banksia. He could still see her with Ella, arguing about the banksia and it’s proximity to the kitchen window.

“I love it,” said Ella. “I love the way it’s arguing with the house. And it’s right. The house is the interloper, the unnatural thing here.”

“But the way it’s leaning, it’ll block out your natural light and maybe scratch the glass,” Sally had protested. “Those cones might even break the glass in a storm.”
“Let ‘em,” Ella had said. “What a triumph that would be for nature!” Robbie had hoped it wouldn’t happen, but he thought what Sally said was very possible.

“The branch — it’s gone,” said Sally now, twisting in her chair to see it better.

“In that terrible storm on Friday,” said Robbie. “Must have been.”

“How spooky,” said Sally. Robbie didn’t need to ask what she meant.

“Irish breakfast?” he asked. “Real tea.” Sally nodded, scrunched her legs up close to her chest, feet on the chair. Robbie smiled. This was just like good old times.

When the water boiled, Sally pulled out the tray from the between the gap of microwave and fridge. “Let’s go downstairs,” she said. “Sit on your verandah.”

She carried the tray to the patio table. Robbie saw what she was looking at. The sliding door was partially open. The lion roared like a frozen MGM moment. “Ah,” he said. “Yes, I’ve still been bringing work home.”

Sally looked at him. He shrugged.

“I don’t judge,” she said, quietly. “But we all know about it. You can’t have children round and expect to keep secrets like that.”

“I don’t know what to do with him, now,” said Robbie.

“Perhaps … you could take him back where he came from,” said Sally. “Couldn’t you?”

“I don’t know,” said Robbie, watching his hands dance in a gesture of demurral. “I don’t know that I can. I mean, I know I have to. But I don’t know how.”

Sally sighed. Turning away from the lion, Robbie noticed how much she resembled a big cat herself. Lithe, measured movements, an impression of strength and power. A blonde mane. He followed her onto the balcony and sat facing her over the teapot.

“Hugh and Lily?” she asked.

“Hugh’s asleep. I think. Or else he’s gone out, probably to see Katie. Lily’s gone to church or Sunday School or something with Posie. I think. I’m the only one home.” He was surprised to hear the bleakness in his voice. When had he started to feel like that? To want other people to know that was how he felt?

Sally poured them both tea. She took a sip, then put her cup down. “Robbie,
you know the police will be coming to see you again now they have a definite identification of Ella.”

Don’t say it, he thought. *Listen to her.*

“I would think they’ll search the house.”

Robbie saw his hands pattering nervously on the latticework, felt his fingers catching in the spaces.

“Do you want them to find a cupboard full of animals?” She met his eyes steadily.

Not to mention the ones that aren’t in the cupboard, thought Robbie. “Of course I don’t.”

“Technically, it’s theft.”

“Technically,” echoed Robbie. “But I’m looking after them.”

Sally laughed. “I’m sure you are. But do you want to have that conversation with the police?” Robbie looked into his cup of tea.

“Come on Robbie, I can help you. With Brett having access it’ll be easy, we’ll take both cars, do a couple of trips. As many as it takes. Today, even. On the weekend, when no-one’s round. And if they are, well, so what. You’ve a right to be there. I’ve a right to be there as Brett’s wife. The police will definitely be asking questions. Everyone knows about your animals.”

Robbie looked at her. “I didn’t tell anyone.”

“Oh Robbie!” she looked at him in exasperation.

“Also, Robbie.” He heard her hesitation, and looked up. “Robbie, would you like to have a — now that Ella’s been found, would you like to — will there be a funeral and would you like some help in arranging everything.”

“A funeral,” said Robbie, blankly. He had not thought of such a thing. “I suppose.”

“A memorial, anyway,” said Sally quickly. “I thought — maybe afternoon tea in the Botanic Gardens? Ella always liked it there. You could say a few words. If you wanted.”

We both did, thought Robbie, his vision blurring as he saw them on Sundays when Hugh was little, feeding the ducks, riding the tiny train, picnicking on the grass.
Sally leaned over and patted his knee. “Oh Robbie.”

He looked at her, still seeing Ella in her blue dress on the grass, laughing and twirling with Hugh, making quacking noises to make him laugh. “It’s a great idea,” he said. Whose voice was that?

Sally leant toward him again, touched his arm this time. “What about next weekend?” Her eyes met his, steady. He could tell she had remembered. Next Sunday would be ten years exactly since Ella had walked out the door and vanished.

“I’ll arrange it, Robbie. I’ll let you know the details.” She scraped the chair back. “I’ll let myself out.”

#

The terrible news did not bear too much thinking, but Posie could not help but do so anyway.

“Having seen Ivan Milat’s brothers so recently, I wonder if it is a sign,” said Posie, tentatively, over the substantial remains of the roast chicken. Robbie had arrived in the middle of luncheon. Both their appetites had vanished when they heard the news. “What a waste of chicken. But I really feel that I cannot eat another bite.”

“It’ll keep till tomorrow,” said Minerva, ripping off some silver foil and covering the chicken before she put it in the fridge. “Whatever we may think or even, perhaps, whatever some of us may suspect — what can we do about it at the moment? Nothing.”

Minerva’s tone was even more definite than usual.

“We do nothing?” Posie’s voice rose so high that Baskerville had growled.

“There is nothing to do but wait,” said Minerva, unnecessarily firmly, Posie thought. “Till the right time. Meanwhile, we need a solid plan.”

“A plan for how to find things out?” said Posie, hopeful, scared, but determined.

“Don’t be ridiculous. A plan for our garden,” said Minerva. “The weather has given weeds a head start wherever you lay your eyes.”

Posie knew that Minnie would need some time to herself now. That was Minnie’s way, she retreated into herself when the news was bad. Posie herself was the exact opposite, she needed to talk, to share, to dissect the meaning of the news.
Which was why, soon after lunch was cleared, Posie took Baskerville for a little walk down the street.

#

Peter’s morning had not improved. When Benita came back from wherever she’d been, she and Clementine disappeared into her room for a girl-talk and they’d stayed there ages. When they’d finally come out Peter had been lying on the couch, scratching his arm. Clementine had looked at him closely.

“You’ve got a tick,” she’d pronounced

Peter sat up fast. “I went on a bushwalk.”

“Weren’t you sitting on that bench under the lantana earlier? Probably got it right here,” said Clementine. “I’ll get the tweezers.”

What followed was mildly unpleasant. But it was the thought of the tick that made Peter really feel ill. He knew it was pathological; ticks, leeches, creepy crawlies in general made him squeamish. He hoped it didn’t show.

“Young we got it in time,” said Clementine. Peter watched her inspecting the black lump. “And got it all. They can really make you sick.”

Benita observed the procedure with interest. “I thought tweezers were out of fashion. Don’t you have to use meth these days, to make sure none of the poison goes back in?”

Peter had needed to lie down in his room again after that. Now he thought it might be time to reappear, see if there was any information he could glean.

He stretched in the frame of the back door to the patio. This was nice. Bit of grass, some tall skinny trees he couldn’t name, a couple of those distinctive banksias. Clementine was stretched out in a garden chair under a gum tree at the back of the yard, talking on her mobile.

The banana chair on the patio was vacant. Cautiously, Peter lowered himself down. He relaxed, hands behind his head as he contemplated. Both girls were a bit subdued this morning. That phone call at 7:30 must have something to do with it. Although last night had hardly been a light, happy evening of fun. When should he start
disclosing? Telling them the truth? Should it be now? Did he have enough? The last day had shown him a Sydney he hadn’t seen before, and he wasn’t sure how much of it he wanted to see. It was a bit … creepier than he would have thought. Squinting into the sun, he saw some more of that tick-bush up the back. And a woodpile of sticks, just the place for a family of snakes. He felt a tickling on his leg and looked down. Two sizeable orange and black ants were crawling up it. He yelled as he sprang from the banana chair, brushing them off, overbalancing, falling awkwardly onto the mossy paving.

“Did you check for red-backs before you sat on that?” Benita appeared at the corner of the door.

“You’re joking,” Peter stared at the banana chair.

“Nope. That’s their favourite kind of place. And by the looks of it — ” she tipped the chair over — “Yep, there’s someone making a home sweet home down there.”

Peter backed into the doorway of the house. “Maybe I’ll just lie on the couch for a wee while.”

“I see me a home under the gum tree,” said Benita. “I’m going to catch some cancer rays. Wake me when it’s time to eat.” Peter retreated to the lounge room, but just as he was set to collapse onto the couch, the doorbell rang. He waited for Clementine or Benita to come in from the backyard, but they didn’t. So Peter opened the door.

There stood a very familiar looking old lady, with a labrador. She looked as though she had been crying.

“Oh hello, dear,” said Posie. “Is Emily in?”

“I’m sorry, Emily’s still away,” said Peter, politely. “Would you like to speak to Clementine?”

“Oh dear, I’m not really sure — ” began Posie.

“Oh Posie, won’t you come in?” said Clementine, pushing past Peter, reaching out her arms to Posie. “I rang Emily earlier, as soon as I heard the news. I was going to come down and see you later.” The dog growled at Peter and he backed into the lounge room.
“He is not so accustomed to men,” said Posie, but as far as Clementine was concerned, Peter thought that he might as well not have been there. Her focus was entirely on the old lady, she didn’t spare even a glance for him. And the old lady didn’t, either. Yesterday’s hero, that was him. Not even out of sight and out of mind.

“Let’s have a cup of tea,” said Clementine, and she shepherded the old lady and the dog to the kitchen.

Peter closed the door after Posie and headed to the lounge. Noises from the kitchen told him that cups of tea were well in order but he doubt he’d be offered any. He considered listening — was the risk of being caught worth it? — but as he hovered indecisively in the hallway the kitchen door was firmly shut. He did put his ear up to it, but it was solid; he could hear voices, but not what they were saying. Then he heard the scrape of the screen door out the back. He retreated to the lounge. To his annoyance, he heard Benita open the kitchen door, the exclamations, soothing voices; then it was shut again. What the hell was going on? He knew he wouldn’t drop off now. He sat on the edge of the couch, considering his options. After a while, he decided to take control.

#

“It’s so terrible for all of you.” Benita beamed sympathy at Posie, patting her hand across the table. Clementine felt her insides churning at the nature of the visit. She wanted to leave. But her experience two were always better than one when it came to managing other people’s strong feelings.

“Oh my dear, it is more terrible than you can imagine.” Posie stood up and moved next to Clementine as she fumbled to pour water into the kettle. They both looked up as an old Ford station wagon zipped past through the drizzle.

“Oh there goes Sally. She is in quite a hurry.” Posie nodded several times, then looked around the room, seemingly bewildered at finding herself there.

Clementine guided her to a seat at the table next to Benita. She looked at her watch. “Probably to visit her sick friend.” She coughed, glanced meaningfully at Benny.

“Devoted,” said Benita, gravely.
“Oh yes, that is a good description of Sally,” said Posie. “Whatever she sets out to do, she is devoted to it. Single-minded, and very determined are also words that spring to mind. She is tenacious.”

“Sally was telling us last night that she and Ella had been friends since primary school,” said Benita. Clementine sensed her quivering, like a hound on a scent. They’d discussed it that morning, the difficulty of finding out some things in a formal interview.

“Oh dear, yes, though of course they went to different high schools, and then Ella went to university. I fancied that they were growing apart, perhaps inevitably, as they grew older,” said Posie, folding her hands in her lap and looking intently down at them. “But then, it seems I was wrong. Just as I was wrong about Ella being the writer, not Sally. I was astonished when Sally published her novel.” She looked up, nodding.

“Poor Sally, she had to leave school early. Her family circumstances were very poor. Very poor indeed. She had very little encouragement in any way, in terms of education, from the home. Oh, she has done very well for herself, extremely well. Despite their sorrow. And Brett has his faults of course, but he is a good man, a kind man who supports his wife, and that, after all, is what matters in a marriage. He is an excellent father, too, always putting the children first. He used money his mother left him to pay for an exclusive boarding school for William.” Posie put her hands on the table and looked pleadingly at Clementine. “I simply can’t believe it, even though I know I must. After all, the police would NOT have spoken with Robbie unless they were certain.”

But she still looked hopefully at Clementine.

“I’m sorry,” said Clementine, feeling helpless.

“I’m sorry that it’s true,” said Benita. “I’m so very sorry. But we will be doing all we can to make sure we find the person who did this to Eleanora.”

Clementine heard Posie sigh. She knew that sigh, the sound you made when it was irrelevant what or who was found. It was a sound you made when you realised your life had changed irrevocably, forever.

“I saw Ivan Milat’s brothers on the train last Friday. I did not know they ever cruised in this area.” Posie looked hopefully at Benita. “Perhaps they have been doing so for years. They are men who do dark deeds in forests, after all. All those terrible deaths in Belanglo.”
“We’ll certainly be looking at every possibility,” said Benita.

Posie nodded. “Of course, the police are always so thorough. And Robbie said that nice Inspector — or is he a Superintendent now? — is involved again. I feel quite confident that he will find out what happened.”

The kettle boiled and Clementine rushed to make the tea. The old feeling that she must keep moving, must keep doing something, was back.

“I’m sure it’s just a matter of time,” she said.

“A horrible time,” said Posie, nodding. Then, out of the blue, “Did you young people have your party last night?”

“Mm. I wouldn’t call it a party, exactly,” said Clementine. She put the sugar bowl on the table and teaspoons on a saucer.

“It was pretty depressing, really,” said Benita. “Tense. Talk from Brett about expectations. Talk about Bruce, Tanya’s dead husband. Talk about their sick friend, Alana.”

“That was the same year Eleanora disappeared,” said Posie, wiping her eyes. “Bruce, I mean. Poor Tanya, so young to be a widow. Oh, it was such a terrible year. And then dear Grace, Emily’s grandmother. She passed away that year too.”

The door opened wide and Peter walked in. “I smell tea!” he said, smiling at them all. His smile faded fast. “Oh. Perhaps I’ll go?”

“No, no,” said Posie, sniffing. “I was just saying how difficult it is to believe the worst has happened.”

“And we were talking about Sally and Brett,” said Benita. “And last night.”

“Not such a happy time for them,” said Peter, opening the cupboard door and taking out a mug. “Though I don’t know if we would have known if you hadn’t picked up that envelope.” He looked at Clementine, then at Posie. “The card from you, Posie.”

Clementine explained.

Posie was pale but more composed now. “But wasn’t the envelope rather wet?”

“No,” said Clementine. “Completely dry. I guess the hedge protected it from the rain. Although it didn’t rain much yesterday anyway.”

“The privet, out the front?” Posie nodded. “There is nowhere else in that front yard that an envelope could stick and stay stuck, if you know what I mean.”
In her mind’s eye, Clementine ran over Brett and Sally’s front yard. The hedge, the trees, the signs of sweeping, the absence of leaves and sludge, the lone banksia and the tidy flowerbed. “Very true,” she said.

“How fortunate that you found it,” said Posie. “Although perhaps it does not matter so very much. I gave it to her personally, so she knew I remembered.”

“Was it a cot death?” said Clementine.

“Oh no,” said Posie, shaking her head. “An accident. So sudden and so terrible. And Lily was just the same age, only a few weeks between them. Oh, it was an awful time. And then, of course, for Eleanora to go missing so soon after …” She shuddered.

“Oh yes, a terrible time.”

“Sally was telling me about it last night,” said Peter, sombrely. “She was saying now that William’s finished school she’s been thinking of Braedon a lot, wanting another baby.”

Benita clunked her mug down on the table. “You two got on well.”

Peter grinned. “I had a good chat to Brett, too. He was very interested in my research project, he remembered me stopping him in the Park.”

An outside sound cut across their conversation. All of them looked out the window.

Peter said, “Wasn’t that a gun shot? I heard one earlier, too.”

“Oh no,” said Posie. “That is the Wongs’s car backfiring. It is in sad wont of a muffler. For some time now. It is rather annoying, especially as they often leave to drive to the beach early in the morning. Oh no, a gun shot sounds quite different.”

#

Robbie worked the late afternoon and early evening away at his desk with occasional pauses to catch his reflection in the sliver of mirror peeping out from beneath The Raven. He’d made sure to close the sliding doors; he didn’t like the idea of the animals watching him when he had his back to them. Especially the lion. It was a bit like being a fisherman; never turn your back on the sea. If you did, a wave might break over you and wrench you from the shore, wrestle you out into the depths of the ocean.
Robbie felt the push and pull of something deep, fathomless and suffocating even when he faced forward. It was ever so, since Ella disappeared.

Somehow, it got to be nearly five. Where were the children? Shouldn’t he be sitting down with them, explaining, comforting? It shocked Robbie to realise that he hadn’t thought of this at all before now, except to think with relief that it was still some way in the future. He closed the study door and locked it. Just as he started upstairs, he heard a key rattling in the front door. Hugh came in, his profile so like Ella’s as he stooped to pat the dog that Robbie felt his throat constrict.

“Hi Dad,” said Hugh breezily.

Robbie’s heart beat faster. “Er, Hugh — ” he began. Then stopped, as Katie appeared in the doorway.

“Yeah?” His son was looking at him strangely. “Have you been drinking, Dad?”

Robbie felt a sour laugh burbling up inside him. It came out as more of a gasp than anything. “It’s your mother,” he managed, leaning on the wall, seeing the hallway blur around him. “They’ve found her, Hugh. She’s really gone.” Vaguely, he was aware of Katie, and then Hugh, reaching their arms out to support him, half dragging him to the kitchen. He only knew that Katie opened a bottle of wine, poured him a substantial glass. That she tried to call Tanya but that Tanya didn’t answer. That she made him a toasted sandwich. That she rang the neighbours and asked if Lily could stay there, even though it was a school night. She organised it all and then she took Hugh off somewhere to minister to him and Robbie was left alone in the kitchen with the wine and remains of cheese on toast.

He drank a couple of glasses rather fast and felt an absurd kind of optimism course through his veins. The dog whined and thumped his tail but Robbie ignored him. He knew another glass would be foolish, maybe more than foolish. But he wanted it. And who was there to care if he got completely smashed? Lily was being looked after by the neighbours. Hugh was being looked after by Katie. He had better look after himself. He was grasping the bottle neck, about to tip the liquid to his glass, when the doorbell rang. Saved by the bell! Robbie sniggered as he went to answer it.

“What a surprise,” he said, when it was Brett on the doorstep.
“Had to make sure you were okay,” said Brett, awkwardly, moving ahead of Robbie to the kitchen.

“Help yourself,” said Robbie. “I was just going downstairs. Come along if you want.”

“Can’t believe she’s really gone,” said Brett, picking up a glass. “Should give this a miss, really. Insides aren’t feeling A1 today.” He rubbed his hands.

Robbie said nothing. He led the way to his study, the dog clicking along behind him. He didn’t care what Brett saw or didn’t see now.

“‘S’nothing on the news,” said Brett, goggling at the stuffed tree kangaroo Robbie had left on the couch. “Nothing about Ella, I mean. It’s all just about a body found in a cave.”

Robbie stared at Brett. “Stop whining!” he yelled at Riki Tiki.

There wasn’t much to say after that. Brett didn’t ask about the kangaroo and Robbie didn’t tell him anything. Robbie was surprised when he picked up the bottle for a refill and found it was empty. He was about to suggest another when they heard Hugh and Katie slide the door open on the balcony above.

“Hugh, it isn’t good for you to bottle up your feelings.” Oh, oh, not a clever move, thought Robbie. Just the sort of words to make a man want to hit the bottle, hard.

Katie continued. “I’ll come round tomorrow morning, okay? Not too early. You might find it hard to sleep tonight, so I won’t come early. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Oh, Hugh, it’s so terrible, I don’t know what to say, I can’t even imagine what prayer to say.”

Robbie winced as Hugh laughed, an ugly sound snatched quickly by the wind. “Perhaps you should pray that no-one we know killed her.”

“Oh, Hugh! I’m sure it can’t have been. And on the news, they said a serial killer, you heard it!”

“You’d better go now, I’m tired. I’ll walk you home.” Chairs scraped, and Robbie sat still as the proverbial mouse. He no longer wanted any more to drink. When he was sure they had gone he looked at Brett, but Brett wouldn’t look at him. Robbie could see him twisting pieces of hair between his fingers.
“Stop pulling your hair out,” said Robbie. “Have another drink.”

Robbie went to work on Monday. There was no place he’d rather be. He’d woken up without a headache. Before his memory kicked in, he stretched, looking for the spider lace on the ceiling. It was still there. Then yesterday rushed up and hit him. For a second it blocked out all the birds.

Wide awake, he scrambled to sit on the bed. Lily. What had he been thinking last night. What kind of father was he? No kind without her mother, that was the truth. But he must tell Lily straight away. He looked at the green numbers blinking on his clock. Just after six. She would be home soon to get ready for school.

By the time Riki Tiki barked and scraped at Hugh’s bedroom, alerting Robbie to the fact that she was home, he was shaved and sitting in the kitchen, ready. 

“People might … ask you questions,” said Robbie, carefully, even as the questions roared in his head. When would Ella’s name be in the papers? When would she become more than just a body found in a cave? When would they lose the protection of anonymity?

“So?” said Lily, shrugging. “I don’t care.” She’d gone off with Chris at the usual time.

Robbie took the train. He didn’t trust himself to drive. His hands had shaken when he picked up the kettle. That was after he’d talked with Lily, but then, so was this trip. Better safe than sorry. There were too many things on his mind, too many brain cells firing, though not making any logical connections, just firing, firing, bulging through his skull. He could feel the pressure but it wasn’t the usual sort of headache. Which he could also feel. He’d got Brett and himself a beer each after they’d overheard Hugh. And then another.
The train was so crowded he had to stand all the way. He couldn’t remember the last time that happened. Had it ever? He downloaded the Science Show from the ABC and listened to it through his phone. It was good to immerse himself in the kind of story he understood. He didn’t notice anything as he walked to work. Once there, he drifted off completely into a world of his own and he stayed there all day. Another conversation with the police, more talk with his children and his work blurred out the rest of Monday.

Somehow he came to Tuesday morning and the beginning of acceptance of all sorts of things.

*  

‘After all this time, someone finding her came as a real shock. I don’t think anyone is stupid enough to believe that she crawled into a cave by herself. Therefore, they’ll be wondering what actually happened. Not that they’ll ever be able to work that out. I shouldn’t think. But they’ll be looking . . . . It’s lucky my plans are already so far advanced. Bringing them forward just a little will be no problem . . . . I don’t really want to . . . . but loose ends are dangerous. I’ll have to work something out.’
Posie had spent a soothing Sunday afternoon at Emily’s with her little schoolfriend and the other young people. They had all been very very understanding. Fortified, as much as she could be in the circumstances, she had returned to number eight and managed Sunday evening tolerably well, in her opinion. Even returning Sally’s call, which Minerva had not, of course, bothered to do. “Don’t you think it was a little rude, dear, not to answer the phone when she was actually standing outside our house?” she asked Minnie mildly.

“Not at all,” Minnie had said. “I didn’t ask her to stand outside the house and ring us up, or to come over.” Posie had sighed. There were some things on which she and Minnie would simply never agree. On Monday they had both rested, although Posie had seen signs of restlessness in Minnie, a hankering to be out after the weeds no doubt. They had been rising early to take advantage of the forecast gentleness of the mornings for the past couple of weeks. To Posie’s surprise, the weather forecast had been correct every time.

Monday night, sure enough, Minnie put forward a plan for Tuesday morning. Posie didn’t feel like it, she felt like doing nothing, nothing at all (and when would the police come calling? Surely it would be soon?) but she knew Minnie was right, it was better to be active.

The sun was peeping coyly from behind fluffy white clouds when Posie and Minnie took themselves to the front garden directly after breakfast.

“The area right out near the footpath, I think,” said Minerva. “The bit with the crucifix orchids and the gerberas.”

“Sadly neglected of late,” said Posie, nodding. Not that it seemed to matter much. Gerberas were quite hardy and crucifix orchids seemed positively to thrive on neglect.

“Weeds. And aphids on the roses,” said Minerva. They settled into the rhythm of work with the old Bakelite wireless for company, set to Radio National. A few fat
magpies stalked across the grass and Baskerville happily barked and chased them off. He then lay panting in the shade as they ministered to the garden.

The distinctive sound of shattering glass made them lift their heads. The scream punctured the smooth talk on the radio. Posie and Minerva dropped their gardening trowels.

Minerva beat Posie to the scene, but only just. Posie took in the broken window. The slashes of honey dripping on the sill and in the sink, trailing across the newly popped toast. The bright stripey insects hovering. Katie, propped up against the kitchen cupboard, a curious glazed look in her eyes, hand to her throat. Minerva bent over Katie, took her hand. “Triple O, please, Posie. It looks like a bee sting,” she said calmly. Thank goodness for Minnie’s steady head in a crisis!

Obedient, Posie dialled. She concentrated on speaking slowly, trying to sound as calm as Minnie. “Ambulance, please. A bee. Or bees. An allergy to bee-stings, that is the problem. A pen? Oh - an Epi-Pen. Yes, thank you so much, we will look. Goodbye.” She gave the address and hung up.

“Katie—your Epi-Pen?”

Katie clutched her throat and tried to speak. Wide-eyed, she pointed to the lounge room. Posie spotted the pink handbag on the coffee table and moved as if in a dream (a nightmare?). She grabbed the handbag, tipped it upside down. Lipstick, tissues, wallet, keys. Posie grabbed the only item she did not recognize (no clutter in Katie’s handbag, perhaps she had cleaned it very recently) and stepped back into the kitchen.

“How do you remember how?” she looked at Minerva. Tanya had demonstrated how to use an Epi-Pen to both of them when Katie was a child, but that had been many years ago.

“I saw it on a TV crime show recently,” said Minerva, and she grabbed the Epi-Pen and uncapped it and yelled “Katie!” at Katie’s limp form. Jabbed the Epi-Pen into Katie’s jeans clad leg. At the same time they both heard the distant wail of an ambulance.

When she heard the car doors slam, Posie ran out the kitchen doorway and stood in the driveway, waving and calling “Down here, down here, oh, hurry, please hurry.”
Two young men sprinted down the driveway (just as though their knees felt none of the shocking jolts from the concrete at all). Posie stood back from the door and waved them in. She couldn’t bear to look at Katie. “Saved her life,” said one of the young men. “She’s in shock, but she’ll be fine now. Excellent work, ladies. Would one of you like to ride in the ambulance with us?”

“You go, Minnie,” said Posie. What if something else happened, in the ambulance? Even though the paramedics would be there, Posie felt as though she could not take any more. “I’ll clean up here. Make sure every last bee is out of the house.”

“Ring Tanya,” said Minerva, clambering into the ambulance beside Katie.

“Ring Tanya,” repeated Posie, going back to the kitchen. Yes, Tanya would want to know as soon as possible, Tanya would rush to be by Katie’s side. She fumbled with her phone. Tanya’s number was in her mobile, secured against emergencies. Emergencies which had been expected to have Posie or Minerva as the persons needing rescue, not providing it. Posie rang Tanya’s number but there was only voicemail.

“Tanya, don’t worry, everything is all right, Katie is completely safe, completely fine but the ambulance has taken her to hospital for the shock. The bees stung her but then Minerva saved her with the Epi-Pen.” There. That was a good message, now Tanya knew everything but most especially that there was no need to worry. Katie was safe.

Posie swept the kitchen. She put on Tanya’s kitchen gloves to scrub the honey from the sink and the sill and the slate tiles, careful to rub gently, picking out the slivers and the shards of glass. Then she looked for old newspaper to wrap the broken glass in.

She looked under the sink, in the laundry and in the toilet. “Well!” she said. Tanya was simply too efficient. Clearly, there was no room for old newspapers in her house. How fortunate, thought Posie, that she herself always kept a large pile handy in her own laundry. There was still outside the house to attend to. Broken glass must have dropped into the garden.

Posie checked under the pot-plant at the side door for the key, careful to lock up Tanya’s place before she left. Of course, there was that open window, a clear invitation for a burglar, but why make it any easier for them. Pocketing the key, she walked back up the drive, acutely aware now of aching knees, of how long it was since she had tried to run. Crossing the road, she started down the driveway to the back of the house, but —
the Bakelite! Sought-after items, they had been on Collectors. How fortunate that it still stood sturdily on the front lawn. It must be nearly time for the arts show, but she would have to wait till the evening session today. Posie took the Bakelite with her round the back and in through the back door, which was, of course, unlocked, as she and Minnie always left it during the day when they were home. She put Baskerville in the house. She didn’t want him getting glass in his paws. Posie dragged out a pile of papers, held her hands out in front of her to balance them and started back to Tanya’s.

But she had taken too heavy a load. She looked left and right, wondering if she could put some down without having to dump them on the ground, where they would be most difficult to pick up; and when she looked left again, she saw Sally.

“Sally, my dear, how pleased I am to see you.”

“Posie, what are you doing? Let me take some of those.” Despite holding Snuffle’s lead, Sally took half the papers out of Posie’s arms.

“Oh thank you, dear, yes, I had overestimated my capacity. I am just on my way back to clean up — finish cleaning up, that is — Tanya’s kitchen. Perhaps you might be so kind?”

“Why are you cleaning Tanya’s kitchen?” Snuffles peed on the jacaranda trunk.

“Is she sick?”

“No, no. A bee stung Katie, so Minnie had to use her Epi-Pen. She’s gone to hospital in the ambulance.” Posie led the way. Sally clicked the gate locked behind them. “Both of them have,” added Posie, waiting, while Sally felt under the flowerpot. “Minnie went with Katie. Oh goodness, silly me! It’s in my pocket.” Posie dropped the newspapers and drew out the key.

“You must be in shock, if you found her,” said Sally, looking round the kitchen, frowning. “Let me finish cleaning up.”

“Oh no, I’m spritely,” said Posie. “I’ll have a nice cup of tea when the floor is mopped. When all this glass is safely in the bin.”

“Did Katie break the window throwing something at a bee?” said Sally, staring at the jagged hole.

Posie picked up a large shard of black and yellow glass. “This looks like part of the jam jar that Katie painted in my Sunday school class some years back,” she said. “I
remember, because we all commented on it, her loving honey so much, but being, so unfortunately, allergic to bees.”

“I suppose she must have had the lid off, and the smell of the honey attracted a bee,” said Sally.

“I suppose so,” said Posie, doubtfully. Could that be what had happened? “There were quite a number of them. It was providential that Minnie and I were gardening round the front of the house for once. We would never have heard her round the back. No, please let me dear,” as Sally gently but firmly prised the mop from her hands. “I want to help.”

Sally said, “It sounds like you saved Katie’s life. Why don’t you go and sit out in the garden with Snuffles and I’ll make us both a nice cup of tea.”

Sitting on Tanya’s spotless garden furniture (how did she keep it so white? Was there some sort of bird and insect repellent in the wood? It didn’t seem natural to be sitting on garden furniture un-encrusted with snail trail and bird poo) in the shade, Posie felt suddenly, unexpectedly exhausted. Really, although she was always prepared, one did not expect to participate in life saving while gardening at nine o’clock in the morning. It was unbelievable. At least, that was what one said. What one would say when telling the story. But really, was that quite true?

She, Posie, did not really believe that any more, did she? She knew the world was not a safe place. This was just further proof. Wasn’t that why she practised at the range, made sure her aim was still true? Wasn’t it the fact that Eleanora, her very own niece had disappeared one morning, from this very street, not long after nine o’clock, that had made Posie vigilant all these years, expecting — what? And — did this attack on Katie by bees change anything? Posie shivered.

Sally came down the yard with two mugs of tea on a papier-mâché tray. Posie recognized it as twin to one she and Minnie had been given one Christmas by Katie, proud of her artwork.

“I’ve mopped the floor and picked up the glass from under the window, wrapped it in paper, put it all in the bin. What a terrible accident,” said Sally, shaking her head. “How lucky she was that you heard her scream.”

father would have said.” Did Sally know that Posie did not believe in that particular God any more, well not very much? Would it matter if she did? Not everyone was ready to admit to the wickedness that walked abroad these days. Abroad and at home. Perhaps especially at home, in this instance.

Oh, she felt so wicked for even thinking such thoughts. That wickedness could walk at home! But the last ten years had given her a distance from life that she had not previously known or imagined possible. She still participated in everything, but she was beginning to feel her age properly now; and she was rarely fully present, except with Lily, for Lily, and, of course, with Minnie. Sometimes. When Grace had passed away, she and Minnie had spoken with the police, not with that sharp-eyed Inspector, the one who was a Superintendent now, but with his underling; but what was more likely than that the strength of their suspicions had been moderated, in the eyes of the law, by their meeting the criteria of fanciful old ladies? And that was when they were years younger than today! And besides, nothing further had happened, nothing at all. No-one else had disappeared. Bruce had died too, but that had been easily explained. Life had simply gone on, outwardly as normal. It had looked as though they must be simply fanciful; and wrong.

Only, it wasn’t normal now, was it. It definitely wasn’t normal to be sitting in your neighbour’s yard drinking tea with one neighbour after saving another neighbour’s life because of some very suspicious bees.

#

“I’ll just give Tanya a ring,” said Sally. Posie saw her press a button on her phone and wait, and then hang up, frowning. “Not answering. I’ll try again later.” Sally took her tea and leaned back, closing her eyes in the sun. Posie watched Snuffles sniff for crumbs, then collapse with a loud sigh.

Posie put her mug of tea on the papier-mâché tray. These serial killers, or one of them, anyway — could it really be that Ella had been killed by one of them? Posie had heard they often seemed quite normal, so completely normal that no-one ever suspected them of being serial killers, or any sort of killers at all. Some of these monsters
apparently even had children, lived with their families, went to church. Even when they
were caught, apprehended beyond any shadow of a doubt, people who had known them
expressed amazement, disbelief, astonishment. It could not be — yet it was implacably
so.

Like so very much in life.

In my life, anyway, thought Posie.

“Once, I would have found it difficult to believe,” said Posie, thoughtfully. “But
not now, unfortunately.”

“I’m sorry, Posie?”

She had forgotten about Sally, sitting quietly now, just at the corner of Posie’s
peripheral vision.

“I’m sorry dear, I’m in a world of my own,” said Posie. “Thinking about
accidents.”

Sally smiled, a sad little smile. Oh dear, thought Posie, it must bring back
Braedon. An accident where there had been no neighbour to intervene, to stop the
terrible thing happening at all. A terrible, terrible thing, a thing you would never get
over as long as you lived. Posie knew that for sure now, even though, technically,
Eleanora might not be her daughter.

Sally’s phone rang. “Hello?” Sally mouthed at Posie, “It’s Tanya.”

“She’s fine, she’s absolutely fine. No, I haven’t seen her, but I’m sitting with
Posie and she has. Minerva’s at the hospital with her. Can you get away? I can go if
you want.”

#

Posie hadn’t really felt up to Bible Study, what with all the unusual and shocking
things that had happened in such a short time. But it had been too late to cancel when
she had remembered, which was after she had rung Robbie to let him know about Katie.
She had thought he ought to be told right away. They hadn’t talked for long but the
telling had been tiring. And then unfortunately today’s study had been on the story of
Cain and Abel, not particularly uplifting subject matter, though thought provoking. She
hadn’t encouraged the girls to stay on as she usually did, but had served scones and little
cakes with tea during the actual bible study. She was sure it couldn’t be irreverent; Jesus
was always doing business round food, just think of those fishes and loaves and how he
managed to stretch it out so that everyone had enough.

She sat in the lounge room listening to Radio National. Minnie had gone to the
greenhouse but Posie had felt she needed a rest. Besides, it was the short story segment,
which she always found interesting. So many different worlds; though often the people
in the stories seemed exactly like people you’d met in real life. Especially the
unpleasant people. Today the story was about a *most* unpleasant person, a man who
made his wife’s life a misery but who managed to convince nearly everyone else that he
came into contact with that he was wonderful. Posie had met a few of those men over
the years, and Minnie, of course, had married one. In this story, the woman planned her
escape meticulously. The plan involved training a wild creature to kill on cue, so as to
divert suspicion from herself. A shark, no less, which perhaps was not entirely
believable, but nonetheless a very good idea. Not ethically or morally to be approved,
but very clever. Who would ever think of such a thing, or be able to trace such a plan to
the source? No, it would look like a tragic accident.

Leaving issues of morality aside, Posie could see no flaw in the plan of the shark
attack, except that perhaps that it would adversely affect the character of the woman.
Who might find it easy to kill again, if everything Posie had read was to be believed!
Still: with such an evil husband (the word evil was not fashionable nowadays but there
were times when it was fitting) would that necessarily be such a bad thing? If her killing
was limited to men of that nature? And who knew what one might do, were one to be
tried to the limits again and again as this poor woman so obviously had been, as so many
women were. Not everyone was as sensible or clear-sighted as Minnie. Posie doubted
that she herself could ever have left Alfie, were he to be revealed as a bad hat after they
had tied the knot. In fact, she strongly doubted she would ever have seen the bad hat.
Unless she had seen it on her own head when she looked in the mirror. It was a
debilitating habit of hers, she knew, to always see the best in other people, a habit that
she had only been able to overcome (and then not entirely) after Eleanora had
disappeared. And then, of course, the social stigma. The shame of it! The
incomprehension of one’s family. Not to mention the practical matters of finding a home, a proper job, of earning a living. Of course, Posie and Minnie had both studied teaching, they had been prepared, which proved quite fortuitous in Minnie’s case, but Posie had only taught for a very few years. Only until Lillian died.

“Minnie?” No answer. Posie heaved herself from the comfy chair, it did seem a long way up and down today, and walked over to the French windows. Sure enough, she could see Minnie’s comforting bulk in the glasshouse. Her all-weather red jacket stood out, and Baskerville’s tail could be seen at the door. Seeing the jacket and the tail brought her father vividly to mind. She could see him now, singing a favourite song while he gardened, a song that her mother thought vulgar but that Posie loved. He had had a lovely singing voice and a considerable repertoire. One of his favourite gardening tunes had been “How could Little Red Riding Hood, have been so very good, and kept the Wolf from the door?” The first song to be banned on radio! How excited Daddy had been, how funny he had found that fact. He had often used it to end arguments with her mother, starting to sing the refrain, holding out his hands and shrugging his shoulders up to his neck when he sang, “And where in the world did the money come from?” Of course, now Posie could see the song was actually quite suggestive, quite fresh, to use a term that had been in vogue in the seventies, or perhaps it was the sixties, she sometimes got those decades quite muddled up, all the loud fashions, the very very short and the very very long. Not the most stylish fashion decades, in Posie’s opinion. And all that ugly polyester! But it was a good point; where did the money come from? There was no getting away from it, everybody needed money to live.

She told Minnie about the Radio National shark story over dinner, and about Red Riding Hood and the money. A chicken and almond stir-fry, Posie had not felt like cooking anything that took time. “It gives one pause to think,” said Posie. “About what can be done, I mean. If one is determined. If one is not afraid to face the consequences.”

Minerva looked at her.

“Of course, it might not be especially easy,” said Posie, spearing a piece of chicken.

“You’re thinking of trying,” said Minerva, taking a sip of wine.
Posie popped the chicken in her mouth. “All these years, I have trusted, prayed and hoped that she would return, that we would hear news. And then, just today, I saw that perhaps I have been too passive in my trust, too accepting of my role, of all our roles, as sorts of waiters, waiting for a revelation. When really it is just like practising at the shooting range. After one becomes proficient, one can tell how to take a shot, when to take a shot, and which direction the trajectory of the bullet will go. There are laws of nature determining shooting just the same as there are laws of nature in the natural world. I mean — ” Posie felt suddenly unsure. *Was* that what she’d meant to say? “A person may shoot a target and miss, or perhaps even an inexperienced person may by chance hit a target, but the bullet always obeys certain rules.”

“And your point is?” said Minerva.

“That if something is naturally made a certain way then there is no sense believing it might act against its nature. Nor is there any point trying to change it. I can see that now,” said Posie. “Poor Ella, how she suffered.” Tears filled her eyes. “And I didn’t understand. Not really, I never gave her the response that she really needed.”

“Rubbish,” said Minerva. “You gave Ella all the love you had, and more.”

Posie burst into tears. “But it wasn’t enough! She was murdered!”

#

Peter had volunteered to do dinner. He’d noticed a leaflet for a local Thai take-away home delivery on Brett’s fridge, and it came in handy now.

“Lucky escape for Katie,” said Clementine, picking over a fish cake.

“Wasn’t it,” said Benita, forking up some pad thai. “How was your day at the office, Petey?”

“I’ve had better,” said Peter, aware he sounded short but too frustrated to care. He’d seen Brett running for his life down Park Street about ten, never to return. Something had happened, but what? More importantly, was it something he needed to know, something that might help him when he took his story public?

He saw them staring at him, tried to take his moodiness off the table. “Bad day,” he said. “What happened to Katie?”
“A bee stung her, actually several bees, I think,” said Clementine.
“Okay.” He was aware his expression said it all, *so what?*
Benita swallowed. “She’s allergic.”
“Posie and Minerva heard her scream and rescued her,” said Clementine.
Peter frowned.
“Yep,” said Benita, attacking a plate of mee grob. “We had quite a chat with Posie about it. This is a dangerous place to live. Hope my water’s fixed up soon.” She chewed, swallowed, spat something out. “Sorry. I’ve been asked to talk to people informally. About this bee thing. And other stuff.”

Peter stared at her. Why on earth would the police think there was anything sinister about an accident with bees?

#

Thursday morning, Clementine was in the kitchen when she saw Brett walking Snuffles. She banged out the door to intercept him. He was Sally’s husband, Sally was Tanya’s friend, therefore Brett would know how Katie was. Clementine was a little worried that not even Posie had been able to provide an update on Wednesday.

“How’s Katie?” she said.

“She was fine last night,” said Brett, pulling Snuffles away from a flowerbed.

Now that Clementine was close to him she could see that ‘fine’ was not a word you could apply to Brett. “You’re not well?” she asked, though it was hardly a question. He looked terrible.

“I’m okay,” he said, dragging at the dog’s lead while Snuffles tried to pee against the liquidambar. “Tired. Got to get back. Sally needs a lift up the station. That friend of hers, Alana. She’ll be home late this afternoon, why don’t you pop round then. She’ll want someone to talk to. About Saturday. The party for Ella.”

“Okay,” said Clementine. But she knew she wouldn’t go. She didn’t want to be part of the misery.

Peter was waiting in the kitchen when she got back. “How’s Mr Life of The Party today?” he asked, nodding at the window.
“Looks really sick but says he’s fine,” said Clementine.
“Too many hairs of too many dogs, maybe,” said Peter.
Clementine laughed. “Maybe. More than likely.”
“Where’s our number one girl in blue?” Peter flicked the switch on the kettle.
“Meeting a tradesman at her unit. But it looks like nothing’ll be fixed in a hurry.” Clementine smiled at Peter. For once, her friend seemed to have found someone whose interest matched hers. She sat with him, drinking tea and chatting. When she got up to refill the kettle, she looked out the window. “Oh no!” she said. In thirty seconds, she was out the door.

#

On Thursday, Minnie was to visit a specialist. Posie had offered to go with her but Minnie had refused. She wanted to go by herself.
“You can get started on the seedlings in the greenhouse while I’m gone. If you’d like,” she said to Posie.

Posie especially enjoyed planting seedlings. Beginnings always gave her a little thrill. She left Baskerville in the house. Usually she enjoyed his company but this time he would just be in the way. She took the radio and turned it up loudly to tune out his barking.

She’d been working for some time, perhaps half an hour, when she saw the snake. It was sleeping coiled up on a piece of old carpet at the far end of the greenhouse. A piece of carpet Posie remembered, with a guilty clench in her stomach, that they had planned to give to St Vincent de Paul’s.

The snake was nearly the same shade of brown as the carpet, so it blended in. Perhaps it had been living inside the roll for weeks, growing fat and shiny on mice, native or otherwise. Perhaps a bandicoot or two had kept it sleek and not needing to forage afield. Posie always thought of all the animals that went into giving a snake its life; on the whole, she was not disposed to grieve a mouse or many but a bandicoot was another thing.

The idea of it waiting inside the carpet made Posie mad. She was sure it was an
Eastern Brown. It was many years since she had seen one in the flesh, but she knew her snakes. Even though it was asleep, she didn’t underestimate the threat. They could be killers when cornered. But now, with the advantage of surprise, she should be able to get away by simply moving out of the glasshouse. Then she could ring the snake man to come and take it away.

But when she pushed the door to let herself out, it jammed.

The snake twitched.

Posie pushed harder.

But the door was definitely jammed. Posie flattened herself against it. Perhaps it was the rain? She thought of Katie, stung by a bee in her own kitchen. She thought of the opaque glass honey jar. No-one could have seen what was inside it before they twisted the top. No one could have seen the snake inside the blanket.

The snake’s tongue started to flick in and out. Posie knew what that meant. It was looking for prey. She swallowed. What could she use to protect herself? She had better think fast.
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Deep Into That Darkness

Posie had no idea how long she stood there, paralysed by fear. The snake tongue flickered. Her heart raced. The snake started to uncoil. Posie yelled.

Suddenly, she found her wits again. She reached under the pot nearest the door and grasped the key they’d left there months before. The door had jammed once, a long time ago now, but they had prepared for the future. She shoved the key in the lock. Then she was out of the greenhouse, closing the door firmly behind her.

She was shaking as she went in the back door. She doorbell rang as she poured water into the kettle. Posie frowned. Nobody she knew used the doorbell. They all knocked, or came round the back.

“Hi Posie, look who I found sniffing round our front garden.” It was Clementine — with Baskerville. “Digging up the daffodils, actually.”

“Basky!” Posie unlatched the screen door. “Please do come in. Thank you so much for bringing him back safely. So many cars driving much too fast, and he is not at all sensible about roads. I did not even realise he was missing!” Out of breath by this time, Posie had led the way to the kitchen. “But how did he get out? I have had a disturbing morning, my dear. Oh, I must call the snake man. Have you time for tea?”

#

At first, Clementine put Posie’s harried manner down to her grief. But as the snake story unfolded, Clementine felt her palms growing clammy.

“It was silly for me to yell at the snake, of course they can’t hear, not having any ears. But the yell woke me up, which I am very grateful for. How do you like your tea?” Posie had made a proper pot with real tea-leaves.
Clementine stood by the kitchen table. “Black, three sugars, thank you.”

“Please sit, my dear. A nice cup of tea and I will be right as rain.” Baskerville whined. “Alright.” She tossed him a biscuit. Then she placed the tea on the table and turned all her attention to Clementine.

“It is so nice to see you. And I do not mean simply because you have brought Basky home. Emily has told me a lot about you, you know.” Posie’s blue eyes looked guileless. “I do not want to intrude on your personal life, but I would very much like your thoughts on certain things. Such as snakes. And bees.” Posie’s eyes opened even wider.

“I’m used to snakes,” said Clementine, the thought popping out before she could stop it.

Posie looked even more guileless. “So I have heard. Of course living in the outback as you did, there are so many different sorts.”

“About two hundred,” said Clementine steadily. She thought, Posie knows. Emily must have told her. She tapped her teaspoon on the rim of her cup. “But they’re okay in their place.” She took a deep breath, made the decision. “It’s when they’re inside your house that you’re in trouble.” As she said it, as she saw the understanding in Posie’s eyes, she felt her insides twist. Was Bart still in a vegetative state? What if he made a miraculous recovery, would anyone tell her? She would ring the hospital, she would check that he hadn’t been moved, she would demand to speak to a nurse she knew. One who knew the whole sordid story of the lazy-susan table-top. One she could trust not to be taken in by his charm. She forced herself to keep looking at Posie. “Or your greenhouse.”

Posie nodded. “It may be simply a coincidence, of course. Snakes are native to this area.”

“It may be,” said Clementine, slowly. “You know what you were telling us the other day?”

“About Sally’s book?”

Clementine nodded. “You said that someone died from anaphylactic shock. Are there any snakes?”

Accidental deaths. It is a murder mystery, after all! But no snakes. Still, once one has had one idea, it often leads to others. And anyone may have read her book. It sold quite well, at the time, and of course we were all talking about it.”

“Benita was very grateful to you for bringing it to her attention,” said Clementine. “The police weren’t aware of how important it might be. Sally had told them she’d written a novel, and Brett had mentioned it too, but I don’t think anyone realised what the subject was.”

“It may be simply my imagination,” said Posie. “I’ve been told I have quite an imagination.”

“Maybe,” said Clementine. “Maybe not.” Sometimes, the things you imagined, the things you feared, turned out to be true. Sometimes, it turned out that you hadn’t imagined anything bad enough. Like that night with Bart. Again, she heard the thunder. Felt her instinctive jerk, the knock of her swinging arm against the lazy susan. Saw it revolving, grabbed it to stop the drinks flying. Saw Bart coming back in the door from closing the bedroom windows. Heard his toast: “To us: May we have many more happy, special years together.” Saw herself picking up the drink, his drink, that now sat in front of her. Saw Bart toss down the drink in front of him in just one gulp . . . the drink that was meant for her . . . Lucky dragon!

The snake man arrived. He went out and caught the snake while Posie and Clementine finished their tea. He came to the back door when he’d caught it. “Unusual for one of these to be inside in the nice weather. But maybe it got in during the rain and once it was there it was happy as Larry in the sun. Anyway, ladies, no need to worry now. He’s going to be relocated a long way away.” He held up the bulging hessian bag. “You have a good day. I’ll let myself out.”

“That is a relief,” said Posie. “Clementine, I hope you will be coming to the wake on Saturday? I would like you to come. Very much.”

Clementine hesitated. Benny had asked if she was going too. She did not want to go at all.

“I am rather — discombobulated by recent events,” said Posie. “It is so difficult, now, to know who to trust. More tea?”

Clementine pushed her cup forward. “Of course I’ll be there,” she said.
Robbie had plenty of time to think while he made sure his animals were comfortable for their trip back to the Museum. It was impossible to catch some of his thoughts, at first. But the more he listened to different movements of the Carnival and other music, the more he opened boxes and bubble wrapped animals and stuffed corners with shredded paper, the easier it got. He still didn’t understand completely how it had been done. But once you started unpacking boxes, really looking at what was sitting in them, waiting all that time for someone to take notice, to pay attention, to really care, then the evidence was there, before your eyes. Now he couldn’t see how he had not seen it before. *Dear Robbie! You wanted to believe that I was coming back!* Yes. That was true. If a person could fish up a coelacanth, why couldn’t Ella come back?

Posie. She knew, Robbie was sure. The way she had said on Sunday: ‘Now the horror will begin. This time we know.’ He had assumed that she meant, this time we know from experience what a horrible thing it is to be part of a police investigation. But now? Now he thought that she had simply been stating a fact. This time we know — *who it is*. Posie must have assumed that he knew too, and why not? It was so obvious once you started looking at things differently.

The cupboard was bare. The last movement but one was playing. Robbie knew what he had to do now.

Friday night would be his night in the Museum. Why not? He needed to be in town the next day for Ella. Lily would stay next-door and Hugh didn’t care if Robbie was around. He could spend one last night with his animals.

On Friday afternoon, Robbie took a carload of his animals for a drive at dusk. By the time he got into town, most of the staff had left for the day. It was easy to take them in, one by one. He left them in his office while he drove back for the next load, and the next. He borrowed the little Museum trolley to assist him with the larger
specimens, like the lion. Once they were all in his office together he started the horrible job of separating them.

The problem was, he’d taken them from here and from there at different times. Some of them had had their habitats completely dismantled. Some of their Spirit House homes had been relocated. It was impractical to put them all back where he’d found them. Their space had been encroached on, eroded by the animals left behind, engulfed by new arrivals. He’d thought and thought about how to reintroduce them. And he’d settled on the endangered species display.

He let them peek from behind corners of the exhibits. Their ghostly silhouettes patrolled, sat sentinel to life inside.

The lion he sat on the discovery table. You couldn’t miss him there. You wouldn’t miss any of them. They would tell their own story.

After he’d finished, it was nearly midnight. Nearly Saturday morning. Robbie sat on the cold hard floor of the dinosaur room. Skeletons of long-dead giant lizards loomed meaningfully about him. The bones told the tale but you had to be able to read them. People clattered past, chattering, exclaiming. Not many of them stopped to look and wonder at the detail. To think of how each individual bone had been dug up with such care, chiselled, scraped and loosened gently from the mothering fathering earth.

Robbie remembered seeing dinosaur eggs in a museum in Las Vegas before Hugh was born. He had gone for a conference and taken Ella with him. They hadn’t spent any money at the casinos, but they had gone to the Grand Canyon and to the museum. What a poor spectacle of a place it had been! A shark in a six-foot plastic wading pool.

Robbie had felt so sorry for the shark. He remembered that more people died from drowning in the desert than from anything else. Hard to believe, but apparently they camped in riverbeds and flash floods took them while they were sleeping. “The power of nature,” Ella had said. A flood was naturally swift and dark and deep. It was not a containable fishpond, or a suburban lake. Robbie felt an odd sensation in his brain, a jackpot clicking, ticking, about to go up. When had he known, in his heart, that she was gone? In one sense, it mattered little, in the end, if they found her or not. She was part of him forever and no-one could take that away from him. But all the unspeakable things he had let himself think, although only secretly, when he was sure no-one else
could see him — all the unsayable things about how she had died, *who had killed her* ...

Now that she was found, now that the animals were here again in the Museum, he couldn’t keep those thoughts away. He was like the boy with his finger in the dike. Once he had shifted his hold on the wall, once he had moved back into the ocean, been swept away off the solid rocks, there was no way to contain the tumultuous waves of his thoughts.

And if he was right, what could the police do?

Why would he even tell them? He had no evidence. Much better to fix things himself. He had been a very good Mr-Fix-It once upon a time in his happy married life. In the past ten years he’d broken more than he fixed but it was still in him, and he felt that now, now that he was coming close to certainty, however monstrous, he would be very capable of fixing more. He was a scientist, and perhaps now he was a mad one, driven to become so by unwanted, unforeseen, events that had taken all the threads of his life and tangled them, crumpled the pattern into a sticky mess. Now he was looking to make sense of something that didn’t make sense. Randomness.

*You’re not a killer, Robbie.* Robbie put his head in his hands. Not naturally, no, he was a creature of habit and of lazy living. But where there’s a will … How hard could it be? As long as there wasn’t any blood. He’d thought it through. The wake would be the perfect, fitting moment. Distractions galore. Everybody would be drinking. How easy for somebody to drink something they hadn’t meant to. To accidentally imbibe fluid that would have a significantly deleterious effect upon their system. His only regret was that it would be a quick and easy death, relatively speaking. How much more preferable was it to see them suffer, day by day, month by month, year by year, as he had. *Robbie! What are you thinking! This isn’t you!* But it was, without her. Without her, he was mired in the darkness, he was lost in a maze of tangled webs. *What did you say, Robbie?*

He had decided on his poison. It was easy, really, once he’d made up his mind to do the deed. *But have you? Is this really you, Robbie?* He couldn’t ignore that voice, but now he wasn’t certain if it was her he heard or if he was simply hearing what he wanted. It was surely natural to feel a kind of madness when you made that wobbly leap across the divide. To consider, to believe, that somebody you knew was guilty of the
murder of someone you loved more than anyone else in the world. It meant that all your
history had to be revised. Everything needed to be looked another way round, inside
out, from a different point of view. Years and years of fabrication, of deception. Years
and years of talking and laughing and living while she was dead.

Robbie was pretty confident that he could manage the police questions. If there
were any. But with any luck it would be thought a natural death. Or another accident.

Robbie curled up on the floor under a dinosaur. He’d sleep on it. People thought
he was mad anyway. Why not give them something to really talk about.

#

On Friday evening, Posie retired early so as to be fresh for Saturday. Perhaps a
little too early, for in the wee hours she lay unsleepy in her bed. 3 am. The time when
souls departed the world and came into it, that was what her mother used to say.

Had she made enough sausage rolls? They were so popular, not at all good for
you of course but delicious and her pastry had turned out beautifully. Well, it was too
late if there were not enough, there would be plenty of food overall, that was certain.
Plenty of food for those nasty black and white birds to try and steal. If any of them
poked a beak in her lunch she would just poke it back. One had to show who was boss,
with animals. Birds could be very bold. Of course, sometimes the birds were victims
rather than conquerors, what about that horrible story she had read in the Sunday
Magazine, about the eels in the duck pond at the Botanic Gardens. Great ugly things,
gorging on duckling dinner. Poor little ducklings! So trusting, feeling so safe with their
mother close by. Swimming about in their very own pond. Those eels should all be
rounded up and shot. A fence should be built to protect the pond. What about the
mother ducks? Did they just go on having more babies, year after year, optimistically
hoping that this year would be different? Or did they leave, fly off to a different pond
somewhere else? But leaving wasn’t an easy thing to do, a new pond would have its
own residents, and there would be scum in all of them. But there was a difference
between scum and poison, a difference which the ducks might not understand. Posie
wasn’t sure if eels were a usual predator for ducks, though she had never heard of such a
thing before. But surely these Sydney eels were especially hardy. How many other eels travelled miles and miles through storm water drains. They were determined, they were going to make a success of their lives. They didn’t care how much they wriggled and wrangled and disturbed things below the surface, how much they disrupted the lives of others as long as they grew powerful and strong. That was why they should be shot. They were no good at all and there was nothing wholesome about them. Posie was all for God’s fearsome and fantastic creatures in general but if one had to choose, one would naturally choose the ducklings and their mothers. Perhaps she could write to the Garden Authorities. Express her opinion as a concerned citizen. She wouldn’t mind taking a pot shot or two at the eels herself, though perhaps not while the Gardens were open to the public. Still, it was definitely worth having a gun handy. And the forecast said it would be a lovely day tomorrow. It was so right to do something to remember Eleanora. So why couldn’t she stop thinking of the one really horrible thing that she knew about the Gardens? Apart from those bats, admittedly, that was not very nice either. What a truly ghastly problem! But then she supposed maybe it was the same in her own garden. Gardens were beautiful and made one’s life so much more worthwhile, it was true; but equally, with the garden came the pests, sometimes serious threats to the harmony and possibility of happiness for every other plant and tree and animal. When that happened, something had to be done. The sea breeze at least would be very pleasant, as pleasant or perhaps even more pleasing than the air here in the bush. Posie sniffed in anticipation.

Then she sniffed again. What was that smell? It was familiar, but something she hadn’t smelt for a good long time now.

It was lucky she got out of bed when she did. The curtains in the lounge room were alight.

“Who is going to believe that we didn’t leave those candles burning,” said Minerva, when they had doused the flames and Posie had made hot chocolate.

“But we didn’t,” said Posie.

“We know that,” said Minerva. “But it isn’t as if we can prove it.”

“You mean, people will think that we are old and fuddly,” said Posie. “And so we are. Well, I am. Sometimes.”
“So people will find it completely believable that we forget to blow out candles,” said Minerva, dryly. “That’s right.”

“But if we had not woken, we would have, quite possibly, been burnt in our beds,” said Posie.

“Exactly,” said Minerva.

“Baskerville!” said Posie. “Basky! He didn’t bark!”

Basky was fast asleep in his basket.

“Drugged,” said Minnie, poking the dog with a foot. “Well, now we definitely know. But the difficulty is, what do we do?”

“I know what must be done,” said Posie. “The difficulty is how to do it.”

Saturday morning, Posie packed with as much precision as usual. Her handbag was large enough, of course it was. She needed nothing extra.

“Are you sure?” Minnie had honed in on the essential question, the only one that mattered.

“Oh yes,” said Posie. “Perfectly certain. There is no doubt in my mind now, none at all.”

“Let me,” said Minerva, simply. “I’m likely to have bad news anyway next time I visit the doctor. Fifty-fifty chance.”

Posie was touched. “That is terribly kind of you Minnie, but of course I cannot,” said Posie. “Fifty-fifty is a very real chance. And this is my … Something I must do. Although I must confess, I do not look beyond the initial … unpleasantness … to the unpleasantness that will follow. Which I do not think will be justified.”

“It won’t be,” said Minerva. “So why invite it? Why not let me?”

Posie shook her head. “Thank you so much, Minnie.”

One more train trip into town, one more weighed down by the gun in her pocket. That idea she had had last night was not bad, not bad at all. Chance would be a fine thing. Where were the trained animals (sharks!) when you needed them? But accidents were another thing, they happened all the time and nobody thought anything of them, apart from saying “what a horrible accident”. That snake, it would have been an accident. (Had the snake really been a deliberate attempt? But surely that was unlikely.
Who wanted to catch a snake, and risk being bitten themselves? But on the other hand, some people knew how to catch snakes. Think of Alfie, he had had them as pets, perhaps another reason she was fortunate not to have married him.) It would have been an accident, and perhaps she would have died, perhaps not. Not too many people died from snakebite these days, not in cities or suburbs where antivenene was handy. But if a person was locked in a greenhouse, how long would it be before help arrived? Still, a snake was a rather risky accident, unless it was locked in a box and you could be sure the person you wanted to die opened the lid. It was not even as good an idea as trapping bees in a painted jam jar. There were many better ways to arrange things, in Posie’s opinion.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Carnival

Robbie woke early, stiff and sore and cold. Looking up at the bony ribs, he knew his resolve had hardened. He would do it.

The decision gave him energy. He couldn’t remember afterward how much time it took to set up the music for the animals, check it would play on a loop again and again, but it didn’t feel like long. Deed done, he crept out the back door of the Museum as ‘Fossils’ began.

It was far too early for the Gardens. Too late to go home, even if he’d wanted to. He thought it best to keep occupied just in case the vial in his pocket started to burn a hole in his conscience. Chinatown. He’d wanted to see the festival. Why not now? He walked quickly through the streets, automatically stopping for traffic lights, seeing nothing of Saturday in Sydney, hearing nothing but the dull thrumming in his head, the rattety-tat of reverberating decision. But he slowed before he got to Chinatown. This was not the time. Why spoil the place in his imagination? There would likely be no dragons to be seen. They probably sleep during the day. Robbie smiled. Perhaps, or perhaps it was just a bit early in the morning. He stopped at a cafe and ate something. He went to another cafe and drank two coffees. When the time was right, he walked back towards the Harbour and the Gardens.

#

He crossed Macquarie Street to walk through the gates near the fountain and kept going to the Rose Gardens without seeing anything. The percussion in his head was so pervasive, he did not register the details of the Gardens. When he got there, to the official place of gathering, he saw people he hadn’t seen for years. People who had hardly known Ella. People who, in his opinion, had come to gawp and gossip rather than to remember. But perhaps it was better this way. More people meant more opportunity for him to act unseen. He tried to avoid the people, to conserve his energy
for the speech he had to make and for the task he had set himself. But it was difficult, then worse than difficult. They all seemed to seek him out, to want to shake his hand, to say something meaningful about her. It was terrible. Robbie felt himself collapsing under the emotional weight of the crowd. Tanya came to him, said something he didn’t hear. But he allowed her to take his arm in hers and lead him down and away from the people through the cool paths toward the duck pond. They came to Brett and Sally, arguing under a tree. The drumming in his head was dulled now, and he was more aware of his surroundings.

“It really smells bad here,” said Sally, her lip lifting in disgust.

“That’s why we’re going to the pond, cherie,” said Tanya.

Robbie turned to explain, but his breath caught in his throat. Look! Ella’s voice in his ear was urgent. She’s perfect! Silhouetted against a backdrop of Moreton Bay Fig, with the light behind her and a breeze urging leaves to follow it, upper lip curled back to reveal perfectly shaped teeth that gleamed white, Sally looked like something that lived in the forest.

My, what big teeth you have, Robbie heard Ella whisper. And all the rest of it. Not now, not now. He couldn’t listen to her stories now. “It’s the bats,” he said, watching while Sally turned sideways to push through the tree roots. “The smell. It’s the bats.” He watched as Brett stepped back to give her room, almost stood directly on top of a grey pointy-nosed creature scuttling into the root cave of the tree. “And maybe the rats, too.” Tanya shrieked and Brett looked round nervously as the tail disappeared. Sally just glared.

“Those bats really smell gross,” said Lily, holding her nose and starting to run.

“I’m going to the duck pond.”

“Alright,” said Robbie, absently.

“Katie, sweetie, would you and Hugh mind keeping an eye on Lily,” said Tanya, tapping her sister lightly on the arm. “Thank you so much.”

Robbie was relieved and ashamed in the same instant.

“I know what the smell is,” said Sally, pushing Brett away as he went to brush some leaves from her hair. “I know all about bats. But that doesn’t mean I like them. Or their smell.”
“Don’t jinx yourself,” said Tanya. “Bite the hand that feeds you and all that.”

“I don’t know,” said Sally. “Sometimes I think it’s out of control. The last shindig I went to, someone introduced me as The Batwoman. When that starts happening, it makes you think about refurbishing your image, I can tell you. Robbie, this way.”

Robbie let her lead him down dappled paths. In a few minutes they reached the duck pond. Posie and Minerva sat on picnic chairs. Tanya gave Robbie a chair behind a tree. He was part of the group, but not easily seen from every angle, which suited him very well. Robbie let other people organise and exclaim and drink while he waited. After the speech, it would have to be after the speech. When people got serious about drinking, when they relaxed. When people stopped trying to speak to him about Ella.

#

It was a lovely day. Posie was very pleased. Rain would have meant there was very little chance to carry out her plan. And umbrellas could so easily be used to hide people’s faces, so you couldn’t see what they were thinking. She had discussed things with Minnie on the way in. They had agreed on a few essentials. Minnie had pointed out that Posie, as Eleanora’s pseudo-mother, would naturally be a centre of attention, and that, given the occasion, Posie could pretty much say what she liked. Now they were both sitting on chairs in the shade, and Robbie was settled within earshot.

“How is one supposed to cope at a time like this,” Posie deliberately spoke more loudly than she needed, and waved her champagne glass as though she had been drinking oodles. Her audience was a little larger than she had anticipated but that did not matter. “I have been trying to think of anything else, myself. To entertain my mind with other things. I heard a most intriguing story on the radio. Fanciful, of course, and unlikely in the extreme. It gave me some ideas, though. Ideas that I found quite entertaining.”

“Sweets, let’s put the picnic blanket here,” said Brett, pulling it out of Sally’s hand and choosing a well-shaded spot.

“Oh, do tell, Posie,” said Tanya. “I’m sure we could all do with a laugh.” She
waved at someone in a nearby group and Posie noticed several people beginning to drift in her direction. She would still say all she had planned. Perhaps it would warn the wicked person, but no matter. Posie wanted them to know that she knew, that she was sure. They were on the back foot now. They could never imagine what Posie had planned. They would not be able to stop it.

To begin, Posie told everyone about the shark story, watching as she spoke. It was clear that most people had no idea how to react. “Such a clever idea, it made me think. I know that Basky could prove to be more than simply a pretty face,” said Posie. “Funnel-webs, for instance. He is regularly digging them out of the compost. Of course, there is an antivenene available these days, but I do wonder what the effect of multiple bites from several funnel-webs might be.”

“Highly toxic,” said Robbie, automatically. “It would partly depend on where you were bitten, of course.”

“But really, one needn’t go to so much trouble,” said Posie. “There are so many different poisons in the garden, in any garden, after all. One only needs to know where to look and how to extract them. Quite easy, in many cases. The difficulty could be how to get someone else to take them. One must probably suggest the sharing of a meal, or perhaps wait for an opportunity and bake for a sick neighbour … .”

“This is a bit macabre, all this talk of poison, Posie,” said Sally.

Tanya shrieked, slapping her leg and leaping to her feet. “Something bit me!” People near her backed away.

“It’s just a flea,” said Brett, leaning over. “Look, see it jump?”

“The idea of a flea circus was revived recently by a Colombian Australian artist,” said Robbie. “She trained them for years.” He looked at Posie. “That shark story. Seems impossible, but the stories of flea circuses are true. This one had flea ballerinas, amongst other things. And there was a travelling flea circus in the sixties that was very well known.”

“Very interesting,” said Posie, nodding her head. “Thank you, I will have some more champagne.” She’d tipped the last glass out onto the grass. But the more tipsy she was perceived to be, the more she could get away with. “But of course, my point was that one needn’t depend on a trained animal, of any sort. Accidents can happen
anywhere, terrible accidents. Taking our loved ones from us. And it is only natural that our thoughts turn to them, at such a time as this, when we think of dear Ella, of how she must have had an accident bushwalking by herself.” Posie shook her head. She did not have to fake the tears. “I think of my own dear parents, my poor Alfie. You must be thinking of Bruce, Tanya. And of Katie’s lucky escape. And Sally, and of course Brett, dear little Braedon. I am so pleased my little card was found. And Brett, your mother and your old friend who died so soon after that.” Posie sniffed. What else did she want to say? “And dear Grace, she may have been elderly, but she was my friend, not to mention Emily’s grandmother. We all know what it is like to lose a friend, after all. It may be worse than losing family, no matter how old you are.”

Brett stood up, spilling his drink over Sally, Tanya and others who were sitting nearby. Exclamations and mopping up activities ensued. Posie tipped out her own champagne while attention focused elsewhere. The group was quite large now. In her handbag, she kept her hand wrapped round the gun. Dithery old Posie, enjoying storytelling in the sunshine, but what stories were other people telling, to themselves and others?

#

Listening to Posie, Robbie’s head filled with the music from the Carnival. When she had finished, pianos and clarinets were playing out the cuckoo movement so loudly he couldn’t hear anything else.

His speech was hardly a speech at all. Robbie couldn’t remember it afterwards. He was aware of faltering, his mind going blank and his hands trembling as he stared into the crowd at her killer. Sally and Tanya had taken his hands, taken over. Sally had spoken, briefly but beautifully, of Ella. She had said most of the things that Robbie had wanted to say. She had done it perfectly. Tanya had been tearing up, Robbie had noticed. Everybody had. All of the Wongs were crying buckets. The other neighbours too. Not to mention some of those Robbie thought of as the ‘hangers on’. But Sally had kept fierce and concentrated. She had done Ella some sort of justice.

Drinks were poured before and after the formalities. Bottles were left handy on
picnic tables. Robbie watched for his chance. If the moment didn’t come, he would need to create it. Or wait for another opportunity. But he didn’t want to wait. Now that he’d decided. Waiting could change things. Now was the time. He would just have to hope for a distraction. Perhaps a call of nature? The amount people were drinking, that was quite likely.

#

Posie had the gun in her lap during the speeches, under her cardigan. If only there weren’t children playing quite so close by. And if only the group was a little nearer the pond. One could hardly say one went to shoot an eel and missed at several metres remove. Especially if one hit a land animal instead. Even if one was a somewhat confused old lady.

It was Lily who provided the opportunity. Lily who called, “Wow, look at the eels! Come and look at the eels, everyone!” Posie rose with the others and walked to the side of the pond, her hand in her pocket now, ready.

#

When everyone stood up, Robbie lagged behind, just slightly. They all took their drinks with them. Did they think they’d be offering toasts to the eels? He kept his hand in his pocket, rubbing the little vial for reassurance. He would be able to do this. He just had to wait for the right time.

#

When everyone was staring into the murky water, Posie knew it was time. She took out the gun. No-one saw it, they were looking at the eels. Posie aimed, a shot that would bleed out the artery, a shot that would be final, a shot that that person deserved for killing Ella.
CHAPTER NINETEEN
Opened Wide The Door

But somehow, when Posie fired, her brain and her body rebelled. Instead of the shot she had planned, she shot herself. In the foot.

Things blurred for a while after that. Events and people’s exclamations and an ambulance. The police. That nice police girl who was living at Emily’s.

They took her gun away, of course. Well, she had been prepared for that. She hoped that no-one would think to mention that it was one of a pair. Minnie wouldn’t, of course.

Around nine that night, she sat in the lounge room by herself reading, looking out to the back lawn. Minnie had gone to bed almost as soon as they got home and taken a pill to make herself sleep. But Posie was sick of lying down. Her mind was racing now. She hadn’t been able to do it. The perfect opportunity and she had missed her chance. What kind of mother would she have been? Not a proper one that could fight for her young.

The silence felt thick with ghosts at this hour. She fancied that Ella was only just out of reach, very close by in the garden. She heard the wind prowl through the gums, seeking something to test itself against and Posie saw Ella, pushed this way and that by invisible forces that howled and gnashed and shattered. Invisible, but real; Posie had always been sensitive to invisible forces, particularly the ones in other people, but for all those years she had done as she had been taught, resisted her feelings, judged on appearances. Encouraged her little niece, the child in her image, to do the same. Posie had not wanted to be mean! Or to reflect a distorted point of view.

She woke in the witching hours. Her neck was stiff from sleeping upright in the armchair. She heard the kitchen door creak. The wind must have found a way in. Perhaps it was Ella’s ghost, searching for food. For energy to keep it going through all this dreary time of overdue justice, all this time since it had been released from a dirty old cave. Posie dragged herself to bed and fell soundly asleep.
Robbie wasn’t able to identify what he felt after that shot. Dizzy and nauseous at first, of course. Though there wasn’t much blood, not really. And he’d kept his head averted from it, after that initial shock. But it was the blood of a real human being and blood that had run through Ella’s veins too. Posie had fallen, half in the pond, with Lily screaming the eels the eels and Brett and Tanya dragging her out while Robbie retched on the grass. The opportunity lost, taken from him by Posie with her pistol. You’d have thought some people might have stayed behind to drink the day away after that but no, the women had been packing up as soon as Posie was in the ambulance.

“I’m so sorry, Robbie,” Sally had said, clasping his hand. He’d muttered something he didn’t want to think about and glared at her. The surprise and then the concern in her eyes had shamed him. He’d tried to talk to her before they left the Gardens, but she’d avoided him after that. Not surprising. And she hadn’t come home on the train. She and Tanya had gone off somewhere. Robbie had thought his hands would be full with Lily, but she’d been spirited off somewhere by Hugh and Katie. He’d spent the evening in his study, feeling empty and bereft. What now?

Now, in the feeble morning light, he decided to go and see Sally, taking Riki Tiki for protection. Hoping that the news he brought of Posie would serve as an apology. Riki Tiki barked as they walked down the drive and Snuffles answered. Robbie braced himself.

But it was Brett who answered the door, and then left Robbie to follow him into the lounge room, where Peter was already sitting. Robbie waited expectantly for Sally to appear. He was confident she would when she heard Riki Tiki barking.

Brett half lay, half sat on the couch. Robbie saw that the almost-empty bottle beside him told the story. Vodka. He was poisoning himself in style for once.

“Man, I feel so sick and dizzy,” he moaned. “I can’t believe I’ve got like this on vodka.”

“Drink enough of anything it’ll take you that way,” said Peter.

“Not me, not on vodka,” said Brett. “My head, too. Feels like it’s going to fall off.” He clutched it and Robbie was startled to see a sizable clump of hair come away in
his hand. A few pieces of hair being pulled out were one thing but that mass . . . Maybe Brett really was ill. … What had Posie said, something about television … Robbie’s scientific training helped him lurch from one thought to another … All those vague gut complaints Brett’d been having lately …

“Next you’ll be saying you’re not used to drinking,” said Peter unsympathetically.

“God. I might as well not be,” said Brett, retching, lurching to his feet. “Oh.” He collapsed back onto the couch. “Is Sally with you?”

Robbie stared. “What? Why would she be with me?”

Now Brett looked alarmed. “We had a fight last night, after she got home. I can’t remember all of it, but she stormed out, saying she was going to see if you or Tanya would put her up for the night. She’s not with Tanya, I already tried her.”

Now Peter stared at Brett too. “Are you saying that Sally is missing?”

#

Clementine still couldn’t quite believe what had happened. Posie’s explanation, that she had been trying to shoot an eel and stumbled at the last second, was believable, but sad, pointing to the fact that Posie must be getting a touch of old timers. Or perhaps she’d had it for years anyway and it was now manifesting in dangerous ways. All that talk of poisonings and deaths at a wake. The inappropriateness had made Clementine uneasy and she hadn’t even known Ella. Now she sat with Benita on Sunday morning drinking coffee in the kitchen.

“Is Posie alright?”

“Apparently it just grazed her. More of a shock than anything else,” said Benita. She’d gone in the ambulance with Posie. Clementine had picked her up after she’d taken a statement at the hospital bed. “She was coming home last night. Very unhappy to lose the gun.”

“Apparently she used to be quite a crack shot,” said Clementine.

“Yeah, and apparently now she’s just cracked,” said Benita, savagely. “Takes too many of the good ones.” She sighed, stretched. “Where’s Petey?”
“Gone to get the containers back from Brett and Sally,” said Clementine.

“Bit early, isn’t it?” Benita looked at the clock. “Ten o’clock on a Sunday. He’s certainly good at getting matey with people straight away.”

Clementine shrugged. “Maybe he wanted to hear their version of events. I think he would have liked to come in yesterday.”

“Yeah, bit weird, that,” said Benita, frowning. “Think I’ve found another live one?”

“Maybe he just wanted to spend the day with you,” said Clementine innocently. “Be there for support, you know.”

“Yeah, right,” Benita grinned. “You’re full of it.”

#

Posie felt very deflated Sunday morning. Baskerville had not woken them early for his walk, a highly unusual occurrence. And as a result, both she and Minnie had overslept. So perhaps it was not so strange that she’d woken with a stuffy nose today, a feeling of not-quite-wellness. But surely a shot in the foot, a little graze, really, couldn’t give you a stuffy nose? Perhaps it was the cumulative effect of her thoughts.

It was after ten o’clock. She would just have a cup of tea for breakfast, and for lunch she would do a roast, something easy and familiar that they might enjoy. If either of them felt like eating. Posie picked out the onions, set them on the sink. One, two, three … there seemed more than she remembered. Now, how could that have happened? Minerva would never have thought to buy onions, even supposing she had been out to the shops. Posie weighed the vegetables in her palms indecisively. They looked a little odd, a little less oniony than usual, was the only way to put it. She thought of the stories she’d told yesterday, of the events she’d alluded to.

She remembered the kitchen door that creaked last night. The dog that didn’t bark, again. The dog that slept in this morning. Alfie’s funeral flashed through her mind, the girl with the golden flowers. Posie put down the bulbs and stared. It was not her imagination. She might not have been able to take her shot but somebody else had no such scruples.
CHAPTER TWENTY
Engaged In Guessing

Peter left Brett and Robbie the second it was confirmed that Sally was missing. He jogged back to the house, swearing aloud. It was time. It was probably way past time. He just had to hope he’d built up enough trust with them to be taken seriously. His mind full of the best way to tell them, he burst into the kitchen.

“I haven’t exactly been completely honest with you,” he began.

Benita giggled. “Oh God, I feel like I’m on *Days of Our Lives*,” she said.

“Don’t worry, Peter, I’m sure it’s not all one way.”

“Wait — you really can pull rabbits out of a hat?” suggested Clementine, and both of them laughed.

“The thing is,” said Peter, “the thing is — ” This was much harder than he’d thought. He bent over and put his hands on his knees to catch his breath, coughed, straightened. “I’m pretending to be a gun for hire. A contract killer.” The giggling stopped abruptly. “I *was* with the job in Britain. I used to be undercover. Something happened.” He took the deepest breath he could. Could he say it? “To someone I loved. A hit, an organized hit. By her husband.” They were both silent, staring at him waiting. “I’d always thought he was a dickhead, a control freak, didn’t appreciate her … but she was, seemed, happy with him so I thought … It doesn’t matter.” He walked over to the sink, leant against it. Took control. The worst was over now. “I couldn’t get the evidence, couldn’t prove it. He was a well-respected community blah blah, they said I was just a jealous bastard stirring the pot. I went crazy.” They were still watching him. “It finished me. So — I left.” Now came the tricky bit. “But I couldn’t do nothing! I swore that even if it couldn’t help Margaret that I’d get it right for someone else. Then try and use it to get her case re-opened. To get the prick.” He pushed away from the sink. “I put myself out in the right places as a killer for hire. All over the internet. Said I was UK-based, willing to travel. Talked up my experience, said I was ex-army, elite unit. Sent on most of the queries anonymously to the police. Waited till I got the right inquiry.”
The way both women looked at him, you’d think he never used deodorant.

“So why tell us now,” said Benita. Was her tone neutral or angry? Peter wasn’t sure.

“And what are you doing pretending to be a magician in Hyde Park?” said Clementine.

That was sharp. Which was good, because he wasn’t sure how the next part would go down.

“Because I’ve — the person I’ve been contracted to kill — I’ve met them. And so have you.” He took a deep breath, looked at Clementine, back at Benita. “You’ve even been inside their house.”

“What?”

Now he had their full attention.

“And now I’m worried that … Well, Sally’s disappeared.” The words spilled from him, urgent and tense.

“Brett? That fellow who’s drunk every time I see him?” said Benita. “Why on earth would he want to kill his wife? What’s wrong with divorce?”

“I thought there was something … off … as soon as I met him,” said Clementine, slowly. “But I just put that down to strange men in cars and my own experience, you know. And it was lousy weather and I was tired and I guess a bit emotional. I mean, there was nothing … ”

“But he gave you a bad feeling,” said Peter, nodding.

“Well — yes,” said Clementine.

“But not because he was planning to murder his wife!” said Benita. “I think we all know any woman’s intuition doesn’t reach that far. He might be a numpty and maybe an alkie but it doesn’t make him a killer.”

Peter took a deep breath. “That doesn’t, no. But what about this.” He’d been ready for this part. He took out his mobile and the printout from his wallet.

“I still don’t get why you’re involved in this,” said Benita.

“A masked avenger,” said Clementine. “Complete with cape.”

He threw her a quick glance. She didn’t seem to be having a go.

“Have a look at this.” Scrolling quickly through his emails, he held up the screen
so they could peer at it themselves.

“‘This is my baby,’” read Benita. “‘Isn’t she gorgeous.’” She made a face.

“With photo of Sally. So?”

“From Brett’s Museum account,” said Peter.

“And?” Benita glared. “No law against sending photos of your wife to people.”

“Agree,” said Peter. “But — ” He tapped the printouts. “Invisible emails.” He watched while they both read them.

“Yeah, so this fellow in the emails is a public official working for a well-known institution,” said Benita. “And . . .”

“Who has a problem he wants taken care of . . . he explicitly says he wants his wife ‘taken out’,” said Clementine. “But . . . Where’s the link between this account and Brett’s Museum account?” Both women looked at Peter.

“Here,” said Peter. He pointed out the line: “‘I’ll send you a photo to confirm.’ I got that email from the Museum about an hour later.”

“So?” said Clementine.

“Pretty dumb,” said Benita, slowly.

“Is it?” Peter ticked off the points on his fingers. “Or is it pretty smart? He asks me to do the hit. On invisible email. Sends me the photo of his wife — from a different email address. Asks me not to email back on that address — probably puts a block on it. How can anyone link the two?” Peter waited for them to look at him. “And if I’m a killer, why would I tell anyone? I’m going to take my money and run.”

Benita shuffled through the crumpled papers.

“They’re all there,” said Peter. “They evaporate in cyber space but I printed them as they arrived.”

“I can’t believe he could be so . . .” Benita was frowning in concentration.

“Arrogant? Narcissistic? Convinced he’s so clever no-one will know? Come on, people are all the time, we know that.” Peter slid into a chair.

“Piece of luck running across . . . us,” said Clementine.

“Me,” said Benita, shortly. “It was me you ran across. Was I on your . . . target list?”

“No! That was a fantastic piece of luck,” Peter heard his own voice hollow, fake-
sounding. “How on earth could I have engineered it?”

“What was it you said — arrogant, narcissistic, convinced they’re so clever no-one will know … ”

He couldn’t see Clementine’s eyes, she’d stood up and gone to the sink. But he felt her tension and he saw it in Benita’s body.

“Look, I would’ve gone to the police eventually. It was just a matter of time. I wanted to chat to him, follow him home, see where he lived. To give the story public interest when I broke it. Meeting you was an incredible bonus, just luck, like I said.” He felt the sweat pouring down his back. This was just like being at work. He’d have to leave soon or explode.

“So why didn’t you tell us straight away?” Now Benita sounded angry. Well, what had he expected. Nobody liked to feel played.

“Would you have believed me? No, you would have thought I was mad. I’m telling you now. I’d decided to after I heard about that incident yesterday … all the accidents happening round here lately might give my guy ideas. Maybe he’ll figure the money he’s paying me could be better left in his pocket.”

“What do you mean, accidents give him an idea. He might be the person that we’re looking for, the one who killed Eleanora Ravell! Didn’t you think of that? I mean, how likely is it, two killers in a community this size.” Benita slammed her cup on the table and swore. “I don’t freaking believe it!” Now Peter saw the anger and the fear as Benita pressed a number on her phone. “Sir? There’s something you need to know now.” She was out the door five minutes after that.

#

After she found the daffodil bulb, Posie felt quite energised. There were important things she needed to set in order now. Things she had been putting off.

She used the stepladder to take three boxes from the highest shelf of her bedroom cupboard. They were not so heavy that she needed help. She set them on her bed. No-one had looked inside them since the police all those years ago. Ella’s precious boxes, all her stories. Paper copies and computer disks. “I’m leaving these with you for
safekeeping, Aunty Posie. Just in case of fire.”

“I think we’re more likely to start a fire here, dear, than are you,” Posie had said.

Ella, laughing. “In case there’s an accident, silly! An electrical misfire or something like that. A bolt of lightning. One of the children and matches!” Her eyes sparkling. “Robbie trying to be romantic and say it with candles!” Then, more soberly. “You never know, Aunty Posie. A burglary, an accident. The kids looking for paper to play with.” She’d brought the boxes round that evening, brightly coloured slabs of cardboard. “Can I ask you one more thing? I’ll sit down with you and go through them, show you what they are. But can you wait for me? No sneak peeks by yourself?”

Posie had felt honoured then. Honoured that Ella had chosen her old Aunty Posie when surely any of the young people would have been more natural confidantes, particularly for her creative work. Of course she had had to let the police see them, when Ella disappeared. But they had not been very interested in a collection of manuscript drafts of fiction, of drawings. After checking to see that there was nothing else in the boxes, they had given them back to Posie to mind. And Posie had not looked through them, except to open the lid and check for moths twice a year. She had been waiting for Ella to come home so they could look at them together.

But now Ella was never coming home. Posie lifted the lid on a blue box. Paper. She took out the bundle. Read some of it, looked at some of the drawings. Oh, Ella! Posie sat on her bed and thought.

#

Clementine was pleased when Peter took himself off somewhere. She didn’t bother to ask where he was going or when he’d be back. He could wait.

She spent the day lying in the sun under the gum trees, thinking. Gradually, the things she thought began to make a horrible sort of sense.

Benita came back mid-afternoon. Clementine didn’t hear the car, didn’t know her friend was there until she was running across the lawn. “We’ve taken him in. Brett.” She collapsed on a chair. “We rang Robbie, told him. As a courtesy. Maybe Brett had the hots for Ella and she didn’t reciprocate. Or maybe she did, then changed
her mind. Poor guy. Robbie, that is.”

“Did he talk?” Clementine sat up straight. “Brett?”

“He’s not going to crack easily.” Benita shook her head. “Denying everything! When we showed him the emails he said “But it wasn’t me.” Just kept repeating it, even when we pointed out the one from his Museum address.

“What about Sally?” Clementine stood up.

“Says he doesn’t have a clue where she is.” Benita laid her head on her hands. “This is the part I really, really hate. Look how long Ella was missing for. We don’t want to wait ten years to find Sally.”
Robbie felt sick. Brett had been — well, they didn’t use the word arrested, perhaps detained was the word to use at this stage of the process. Police needed concrete evidence. He gathered they’d got some email from the Museum which they thought was highly suspicious. But Robbie could see how that might have happened. What had he thought, that Friday night in the Museum … ‘It was too easy, how much better if there was suffering if their death was not a quick and easy one’ … It was not a particularly original thought. It was a thought that anyone could have. A thought that anyone who loved could easily find hovering somewhere in the universe. *And what if another person who loved, whatever that meant to them, had also had that thought and acted on it?*

Robbie moaned. He had been prepared to take someone’s life in the grip of that madness.

But perhaps he was wrong. Hair falling out, even in clumps, meant nothing by itself. He stumbled out the door and walked down to Posie’s in a daze. What if he was right? How had he not seen it before, when all those years it was in front of his eyes? Why hadn’t he been listening, really listening to Ella?

Posie answered the door straight away. “I just came to see how you are,” said Robbie, weakly. Did he dare ask?

“Oh I am very well Robbie, very well indeed. Despite the fact that someone has tried to poison me with daffodil bulbs.” Posie nodded.

He looked at her blankly.

“And possibly with a brown snake, too, though I am not so certain of that. Snakes are part of nature where we live, after all.” Posie pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Oh, they were very clever but the daffodil bulbs were a mistake.”

Robbie gripped his hands together behind his back. “Did you hear they’ve arrested Brett?”

The look on Posie’s face told him everything he wanted to know.
“I thought you should know straight away.”

“Thank you for telling me, dear. It is all terribly sad. But a relief that things are almost at an end.” Posie shook her head. “I have decided to talk to that nice policewoman, just to set things in order. But come in, just for a minute, if you would.”

Robbie stepped into the hall and followed Posie into her room. On the bed sat a blue box and a piece of paper. Posie picked up the paper. “Perhaps you might be interested to have this drawing I found while I was tidying up just now. A little momento that Ella left.” She handed him the drawing. A drawing of a cane toad, wearing a crown on its head. A title underneath: “Cain Toad”. The legend on the back: Sally. “I thought you would want to see it.” Posie looked at him. “There was this, too.” She put the blue box in his hand. “It is all there my dear. The reason for it all.” She said, softly. “If only I had realised the danger.” She shook her head. “Perhaps you would like to come with me to Emily’s, to see the policewoman who is staying there.”

Robbie clutched the box tightly. “I would,” he said. He pulled out his phone and rang Benita’s number.

#

They were on the motorway, driving to the city when Benita’s phone rang.

“Yes?” Clementine heard the tone of her friend’s voice change. She saw her stiffen as she listened. Listened for what felt like minutes. Would the conversation finish before they went into a tunnel? Tension filled the car. “I’m driving now. Any chance you could bring it in? To City Central? Meet you there.” She hung up. “Robbie reckons he has some evidence. He’s bringing it in.”

Her phone rang again. “Sir?” Again, Clementine waited. “Thank God.” She hung up. “Sally’s rung the station. She won’t say where she is, but she disappeared because she’s scared Brett’s been trying to kill her.”

#

The trip into town seemed to take no time at all. Posie kept her thoughts to
herself. She did not need to burden Robbie any further. And she needed to save her energy. Convincing people about things when they had a different idea already in their heads could take such a lot of energy.

Benita met them at the front desk.

“Carruthers is with Brett. Interviewing him.” She led them into a room. “Tea?” Before the tea arrived, Posie started talking.

“The daffodils were very clever, very clever indeed. If I had mistaken them for onions and cooked them for us, it is likely that both Minnie and myself would have been severely affected, quite likely killed. But I have always had an aversion to daffodils, in any form.” She paused for breath. “Before that, I was sure anyway, of course. But now I have proof.” She pointed to the blue box.

#

Clementine watched, puzzled, as Benita lifted the lid to reveal a sheaf of papers.

“I don’t understand,” said Benita, slowly.

“No, and I am sure she would have an explanation. I can hear her. She would say, ‘Ella kept a copy for me, I asked her to. She probably didn’t want to get it mixed up with her stuff. That doesn’t prove anything, except how good a friend she was to me.’ But Sally did not write this —” Posie tapped the pages. “This was Ella’s book. Look, she has written on it, ‘this one’s for you, Aunty Posie. Because you know how hard I’ve tried! all my love, Ella.’ Sally stole Ella’s book!”

“Are you saying Sally murdered Ella because she wanted to pass herself off as the author of a book?” Benita sounded incredulous.

“Because she wanted to pass herself off as the author of this book,” said Posie. “The stories in this book — they are all things that happened. They have been put together as fiction, names disguised, places too, but they are all things that I know about. Things that happened when Sally was around. When I first read Sally’s book, the one she published, I was astonished, and not just because it was well written. I was astonished seeing all those . . . accidents . . . in the one story,” Posie paused. “I saw a pattern. But I said, Posie, what a terrible thing to think! And the idea that she would
write those things down, put them all together for everyone to see! If it were true. But I should have known. All her life she was jealous of Ella. Ella was so lovely. People warmed to her, she was so very real, so caring. And so talented! I wondered whether Sally pushed that poor little boy off the boat because Ella liked him so much. Jealousy. He was an artistic little boy. And we all knew how she felt about Robbie.”

Benita looked stricken. “Well, I don’t know … ”

Narcissistic, the centre of attention … Clementine thought about Sally’s insistence on the Saturday evening get-together. She thought about Posie’s card, stuck in a hedge where someone would surely find it the night of the party. About how it would set the tone.

“Maybe when her baby died … ” Clementine didn’t realise she’d spoken aloud. She stopped mid-sentence. *Maybe her baby dying made her mad*, she’d been going to say. But then, if what Posie was saying was true, Sally had been a killer long before her baby died.

“That may have been an accident. But although it is very wicked of me, I do not think so.” Posie shook her head. “Brett had the pool filled in after.”

“You mean, Brett knows?” Benita sounded shocked. “He knows and he’s said nothing?”

“Oh my dear, he knows in the same way I do. He has said nothing because he does not want to believe it. It is too terrible to think. And for him it must be even worse than for me.” Posie sounded very tired.

Clementine thought of Sally’s meanness to Brett, her efforts to ensure that others saw him as she did. Of Brett, looking increasingly haggard.

“I did not ever think she was such a good friend to Ella as Ella was to her, but I could not believe that she could be so . . . evil.” Posie’s voice broke. “I do not know how she killed my darling Ella but I am sure now that it was her.”

“Still, what you’re saying isn’t — ” But Benita was cut off.

Clementine had been very aware that Robbie hadn’t sat down. He had paced the room restlessly while Posie talked. Now he spoke, fierce and passionate, more alive than Clementine had seen him.

“I’m willing to bet that if you go to Sally’s house there’ll be a bottle full of
vodka maybe more than one bottle, that hasn’t only got vodka in it.” Robbie took a deep breath. “She used thallium. When I saw him pull out his hair, so easily, and so much of it.” He shuddered. “She wanted him to suffer. I’m sorry if I’m not completely coherent about this. God, I let her comfort me. I thought that Brett — And all the time she was — I think he tried to tell me who she was, but I wasn’t listening. She wanted to destroy him, because he could see who she really was. What she really was. Is. Although he probably couldn’t believe it. And because he loved Ella. That’s why she’s made that allegation. She wants him to suffer.”

“And so she wants him to get the blame for killing Ella.” When Benita spoke the words out loud, Posie nodded. Clementine heard the ring of truth. “But, if it is true, what you’re saying, it still doesn’t make sense. I still don’t understand why?” Benny seemed almost to be talking to herself.

“Will we ever understand why, really?” Posie spoke very softly but Clementine heard.

#

After that, Robbie wanted to see Brett. Benita arranged it without a murmur, without raising any objections, which told Clementine volumes about what her friend thought. She brought Brett to them herself.

“I felt like I was going mad, sometimes. Especially lately.” Brett put his head in his hands.

“You are,” said Robbie, grimly. “That’s the thallium.”

“Thallium?” Brett looked bewildered. He shook his head, continued. “There’s been nothing concrete, ever. I told myself it couldn’t be. But I felt so nervous.” He took a sip of water. “Ever since Braedon passed away. Even before that, if I’m honest. My mum died just after Braedon and she left me a bit, put in her will that she’d like it go to William’s education. So I sent him to boarding school. Sally didn’t want him to go, but I didn’t want him home any more.” He swallowed. “He was too accident prone. I got the pool filled in, after Braedon, but William had had so many close calls.”

What was it Posie had said about Brett? ‘He’s a good man, a kind man … He is
an excellent father, too, always putting the children first. He used money his mother left him to pay for an exclusive boarding school for William’.

“I loved Ella, you know.” He looked at Robbie pleadingly.

“I know. She knew, too,” Robbie put his hand on Brett’s arm. Tentatively, but he did it.

“That story Katie told us — Sally did chop up cane toads for soup.” Brett swallowed. “She told me. Told me that after she’d done it she realised they were poisonous, so she threw the soup out. She had to tell me, apart from there being a lot of toads missing, Bruce saw her too.” He swallowed again, tried to speak.

Clementine felt horribly sick.

“She screamed at me when I asked where the dead toads were, said she’d thrown them out. I was worried maybe they’d escaped, you see, that she’d let them out. Even accidentally. So I looked. And I found the blender, with this gloopy muck inside it. She wouldn’t have wanted to risk using it again. She knows they’re toxic.” Brett was whispering by now. “I didn’t understand it at the time. But I’ve thought and thought and thought about it. I think that’s how she did it. She cooked them into something, and . . . invited Ella on a picnic.”

“It makes sense of her trying to kill Katie,” said Posie. “That was very clever, too.”

Brett looked at Robbie. Clementine thought she’d never seen such a miserable, harrowed look. “I always wondered about Bruce. When Katie bought up the toads at your house that night — I just wanted her to shut up. I didn’t want it to get back to Sally. Nothing had happened for so long. And Ella’s body hadn’t been found then. I thought if I said no way, it must be her imagination, then she’d leave it. But Katie got onto it the next day, too!” He shook his head. “I knew, I knew it must be Ella in the paper. So I thought, maybe they’ll find some trace, maybe I can say . . . ” He put his head in his hands. “Forgive me, I don’t know what I was thinking. I was scared and I felt so sick and like I must be crazy. And she was my wife.” He started crying.

She wanted out, right now, but Clementine waited while Benita organised for Robbie and Posie to make formal statements.
“But what about Peter’s evidence about Brett?” Having seen the others out, Clementine and Benny were walking down to Chinatown in search of a feed.

“What evidence?” said Clementine. “She did it herself. Sent that one email from a traceable address, Brett’s work address, so as to clinch it. If there’d been an investigation into Brett, we’d have seized his computer and done the forensics. We’d have found the email, traced it, worked it out — we would have been absolutely sure he was the killer.”

“But if all of this is true, where is Sally? Did she disappear to make us to focus on Brett? Or is she really scared of him? I think the jury’s out. No matter what Posie or Robbie or anyone else thinks. No matter if there’s ten novels or ten bottles of thallium. The way things are looking now, Brett could have put any thallium we find in any vodka bottle as easily as Sally, to make us think he’s innocent. She did say she thought he’s been trying to kill her. We need to keep a close eye on him. Until she turns up and we can get her story too we can’t be sure either way. And even then, maybe this is something just between them. Nothing to do with Ella at all.” Benita shook her head. “A media release is going out, saying she’s missing, asking for anyone who knows where she is to contact police urgently. That’s all. It should bring her in if she’s innocent, or at least get her to call. Or anyone who recognizes her.” She looked at her watch. “Should be happening just about now. Let’s talk of something else while we eat.”

They’d driven home and were lying in front of *Law and Order SVU* when Benita’s phone rang again. “Sir?” She was only a few seconds but when she hung up she groaned. “Got to go back in. Somebody called Alan’s turned up. Saw a news bulletin.”

“Alan?” Clementine raised her eyebrows.

Benita nodded.
“Sounds a lot like a name for a sick friend to me,” said Clementine.

#

It was late when Benita got back, nearly midnight. Clementine had waited up.

“Tea?”

“Forget tea, give me a real drink.” Benita waved the bottle of wine. Clementine grabbed glasses and they sat at the kitchen table.

“Here’s the brief, briefly.” Benita sighed appreciatively as Clementine poured the wine. “They’d been having an affair for a couple of years, her and this Alan. Sally became very … persistent the last few months, talking about leaving Brett, saying she was scared of him. That he’d been violent to her in the past, that she thought he might harm her. Alan believed her, but he didn’t want her to move in with him. I don’t think he thought it was the love of his life.” Benita snorted. “After Ella’s body was found Sally told him she was scared Brett might have killed Ella. She paused for a swallow of wine. “That really scared him — Alan — he wondered if Brett might come after him — and he told her to go to the police. She told him she had and that she’d told us she was staying with Alan, while we investigated Brett. I reckon she was waiting for us to check Brett’s computer and find the email she sent from his work account — and voila! ‘Evidence’ to get Brett convicted.” Benita took a couple of big gulps. “Any cheese? She is one sick, vengeful puppy.”

Clementine handed her the cheese, a plate and a knife. Benita hacked as she kept talking. “It gets even better. Alan gave us her memory stick. It’s got a kind of diary on it. Seems she left it in the computer, he mixed it up with his. She must have seen the news that we were looking for her, knew he’d see it too. So she’s gone AWOL on him. But he was in his study working all evening, he had no idea she’d gone. He went to use the memory stick … and found her diary. Then, he saw the news and came straight in. I think he’s hoping for police protection.” She shoved a large piece of cheese in her mouth. “Loony tunes! And there’s heaps more where this came from.” She reached inside her jacket and took out a wad of foolscap paper. Unfolding it, she handed a few sheets to Clementine.
Clementine felt herself growing cold as she read.

‘As soon as I heard that cane toad story, I knew Katie wouldn’t shut up. She’s always been stubborn, from a child. On, and on, and on until she thought she’d won her point. Yowling so loudly you had to hear her. If I was Tanya I would have drowned her years ago. I still remember Bruce, coming in the back way, wanting to borrow some sugar for a cake Tanya was going to bake him. As if he should have been eating cake! He was so gross. I didn’t hear him because I had Joan Armitage up so loudly. He saw me chopping up the toads. I tried to laugh it off, say Brett had been wanting to try frog’s legs and I thought I’d surprise him, but I wasn’t sure if he’d swallow it. I was going to say later that I hadn’t liked the look of them so I’d thrown them out. Tell Brett the same thing. Especially as I thought she might not die, just be awfully sick. I thought it would be easy but those two interfering old bitches started nosing about, getting the police much more involved than they needed to be. Well, I did tell Brett that I’d thrown out the toads but Bruce wasn’t so easy to shut up. I could see the way he looked at me. He had to go. That wasn’t difficult, his doctor was already expecting something. I was sure Posie suspected, though. But I knew she wouldn’t come right out and say it. Too awful for her! And Ella was only missing, after all.

I have to get all this out, written down, so I’m in control. Sometimes lately I’m so angry that I’m afraid I’m going to let something out at the wrong moment. So I’m going to discipline myself to think of writing it down, as soon as I think of it. Writing will be my friend again, as it was all those years ago when Ella died. People always look for patterns and they find it hard when there isn’t one. “Everything happens for a reason” — oh please. That has to be one of the most nonsensical statements I ever heard. Truly. It doesn’t make semantic sense, whatever way you read it it’s sloppy, circular, logic. This event happened because of this — explaining the past by looking back from the future and providing attribution. But people like this kind of thing. It makes them feel safe and happy. People let things happen. Not everyone has the courage to be like me, to take control of their own life and take risks, do and say what
they think is right for them. Most people just accept what happens and make a story out of it, whatever makes them happy, whatever they think other people will believe. They let other people get away with their lives, totally invade them! On the other hand, you could say that everyone makes reasonable choices — choices that are reasonable to them. The choices I’ve made have always made complete sense to me, though I know they wouldn’t to everyone.’

Clementine looked up at Benita. “There’s more?” Her hands were clammy now.

“Oh yay. A whole bloody book of it, just about.” Benita filled her glass again and handed over some more paper. “Next instalment. Though you never read it from me, remember. Media’ll get hold of it at some stage I expect. If you can just keep it between us till then?”

#

‘I’ve always been a good liar. Perhaps because I don’t put the stock in truth telling that most people I know do. I worked it out pretty quickly when I was a child, what would wash and what wouldn’t. As Carl Jung said, the greatest gift you can give yourself is a little bit of your own attention. I agree with that, in principle; I’d just change the sentiment slightly and say the greatest gift you can give yourself is your full attention, full stop. Let’s be honest — that’s really what everyone thinks, whatever they say.

This is my story, not anyone else’s. Especially not hers. It’s been so good to see his suffering all these years. To see him wondering, not quite sure, not wanting to believe it, thinking maybe it was just a horrible coincidence. Did he really think I was so stupid that I didn’t see where his eyes were? And other parts of him, too, if he’d had the chance. But she was so silly about Robbie that I bet he never got it.

How much better if she’d simply remained missing! I sincerely mean that. There’s nothing worse than not knowing. If only she hadn’t been found. I took a risk with that fire, but it was worth it. It took out the bridge. No-one went walking down there for years after that. They couldn’t. So after all this time, someone finding her came as a real shock. I don’t think anyone is stupid enough to seriously believe she
crawled into a cave of her own volition. Therefore, they’ll be wondering what actually happened. Not that they’ll ever be able to work that out, exactly. I shouldn’t think.

I knew it was Ella right away, as soon as I read it in that paper. I wasn’t unhappy about the serial killer speculations. It would have been quite good if a stranger took the blame. The downside, really, was that now the police would be poking around again. Last time they actually impressed me with their competency and I was quite worried for a little while. I knew Posie suspected something but she wouldn’t come right out and say it. Too awful for her!

Stupid Katie and bloody Bruce. If that child had done what she was told, there wouldn’t have been any problem at all. Granted, Ella would have been ‘missing’ but Bruce could have lived a bit longer. Obesity-related issues would have killed him early anyway. I don’t know that he would ever have had the nerve to say anything to my face. But he might have talked to Posie. And I almost forgot Grace, snooping and poking and asking me all those questions about the murders in my novel. She knew; or she sounded like she did. I had to get rid of her, too.

I was so angry when I realised what Ella had done. Apart from all the other things she’d done, all my life. Stealing my friends, stealing Robbie. Always making people like her, want her instead of me. I did what I could but I couldn’t get what I wanted. And then she stole my story. Those things in that book, they were mainly things that I had thought of, I had done. A few of them were made up, but most of them were mine. My creative works. If anyone was going to make money from them, it should be me! Things that didn’t happen in a few months, like in her lousy book, but over years. That was my time and energy invested. She only knew about the things because she’d known me for so long. She wrote it down and changed the times and the places and she was going to be paid good money for it.

I knew she was working on something she didn’t want me to see. I broke in one day, and I found the manuscript pretty easily. It didn’t take me long to see what it was about. I took it back to my place, of course. But she might have had copies . . . I was beside myself. After she … disappeared … I changed a few crucial things, some of the ages, boys into girls, locations. She’d done some of it, but not enough. That was all I had to do to make me feel safe. But it had to be done.
And then — all these years later, after they found her, I was scared. Because of the way Posie looked at me. Because of the way she brought up the book. I knew she must have wondered. I knew she thought that I might have done it. She was dangerous. I knew she’d have to go. But I was thinking clearly again now. I was quite sad, really, that she knew. I’ve always had a soft spot for Posie. So I didn’t want her to suffer. Not like Brett. And Katie, too, I wanted it to be quick and natural. I think that having the success I’ve had with my art has made me more generous than I used to be. I couldn’t believe it when those bees didn’t carry her off.

The strange thing is, although I didn’t feel especially good about Ella, it’s worked out really well for me. You could say she saved me from myself! Because of that book, I was able to get my own career up and running. I was in such a slump before that, stuck at home with a horrible whiny baby who hated me. Well, I’d dealt with that problem, but I couldn’t see my way forward in the long term. That book gave me a chance, and I’ve had incredible success, with the gothic being so fashionable. Money for jam. So I don’t regret killing her at all now.

She would have had to go, anyway, even if it wasn’t for the book, because I realized that she suspected about Braedon, that she’d told that interfering old Grace as much. No, I don’t regret her. Or Bruce. Tanya and I’ve become so close since he went. And she’s a much better friend for me than Ella ever was. Ella would never have helped me lie to Brett about Alan.

Now Ella’s been found, I’ve decided. Brett’s been useful but after he refused to have any more children he was always on borrowed time. If my career hadn’t taken off like it did he wouldn’t have lasted this long. It’s suited me to stay with him while William was still at school, even if Brett did insist on that boarding thing. I wouldn’t want to look like a bad mother. But now she’s back it’s time for him to go.

The whole thing’s left me with a few problems to solve, some challenges. That’s how I look at it. Life is there to be managed and you have to lean into the curves, even if that sometimes results in a detour. I find that accidents almost invariably have to happen. Such a useful concept, random chance intervening in a life, in all our lives.’

Clementine put the papers down, pushed them as far away from her as possible.
Benita had drunk her second glass of wine. “Mad. She’s got to be.”

Clementine said nothing. She thought of Bart.

“We’ll get her. The world’s not so big anymore. She can’t stay lost forever.”

Benita nodded vigorously. “Might take a while but we’ll find her.” She tipped up the wine glass. “Better late than never.”

Clementine wondered.
A couple of days later, Clementine moved the banana bed under the golden elm and lay down, having first checked it assiduously for red-backs. She’d hosed it down after Peter’s experience, but she knew that the spiders were persistent. They had to be to survive in this environment. But there were no webs and no distinctive sharp shiny shapes ensconced in the plump plastic louvres. She settled back, sunhat over her face, eyes closed.

She heard the screen door creak and bang, then Peter’s voice: “Thought you might like some coffee, oh sorry, oh GOD!”

It was a cry of fear. Clementine batted the hat off her face and swung her feet over the lounge.

A water dragon sat between herself and Peter, who stood, absurdly frozen, like someone in a farce.

“What is it?” he whispered.

“It’s a dragon,” said Clementine. The creature stood up on its hind legs, alert to the threat in its environment.

She felt a tingling rush of emotion. She could hear her mother’s voice. You lucky dragon, you will have a good life, a dragon life.

“Is it dangerous?” Peter was still whispering, holding himself taut and motionless.

“No,” said Clementine. “It’s lucky.”

She did not have her mother’s blind faith, but maybe she was developing some. Faith in being a lucky dragon. Faith in believing she could learn to live and trust again. Faith that she would be able to keep the snakes away. They were all around, under rocks, in trees, across the path when you were walking, eyes to the sky all the better to rejoice in being part of the natural world. You had to watch your step, but they could be avoided. She took a mug from Peter. “I think Benita will want to know some more of your story as soon as you can tell her.”
He relaxed, slightly. “Margaret was my childhood sweetheart,” he said. “I’ve had heaps of girlfriends since but no-one that I cared about like her. But what can you do? She said I’d always be her best friend, but she wanted to marry Stewart, the tosser. I told her what I thought of him, I never trusted him. But she just thought I was jealous.” His fists clenched, unclenched. “When she died — it was listed as an accidental death at first. I had to push so hard to get them to even start to look at it differently. It made me crazy, cost me everything.” He looked at Clementine. “I thought if I could just show that someone else, some other reasonable citizen working in public life had the same idea to have their wife ‘taken care’ of — it might get the attention of someone important. Get her case re-opened. Not to mention I’d be saving someone’s life. And rescuing myself at the same time. And that’s just the edited version. Think she’ll really want to know?”

“You can only tell the truth and find out,” said Clementine.

#

Posie stared out the kitchen window as she stirred the porridge. Baskerville was digging in the vegetable patch. She banged on the glass. He wagged his tail sheepishly and moved away. Posie turned to where Minerva sat reading the paper.

“Is there anything of interest?”

“Some sensational account of how an undercover policeman trapped a killer for hire by posing as the woman the killer was meant to kill.” Minnie put the paper aside. “You can’t believe everything you read these days.”

Posie glanced at the porridge. “The garden’s looking quite good. Parts of it at least.”

“That’s what happens when we pay it a bit of attention. Dig the beds properly.” Minerva sipped her tea. “This is just right.”

She had forgotten to call the plumber, she would do that today. But she would make sure he understood that the liquidambar was not to be disturbed. She did not want to lose it. For the garden to thrive it needed more than a bit of attention, it needed the right sort of plants as well as the right sort of digging.
The magpie warbled and spread out his black and white wings. Posie noticed there was just a touch of grey. He must be a baby, still learning about the world. He strutted down the branch, peering down at the dog. She could see he wasn’t scared.

She poured the bowls, set them on the table. She was going to take some of Ella’s pictures to the framer later today. They would look perfect in the lounge room.

She sprinkled sugar, picked up her spoon. “There is still no understanding the wickedness of it. But the police are looking for the right person now. And they will find her, surely they will. The world these days is much smaller than it used to be.”

Minerva tasted her porridge.

“I hope you’re right,” she said.

#

Robbie went to work the next day. There was no reason to stay home, especially now. He belonged in the Museum. The whole thing about stories, about the pleasure that they caused, was that there was a satisfying ending and then? *And then?* He could still hear her, feel her prodding him, poking him so he was gasping too much to read aloud, so that Raver ran from one end off his perch to the other, whistling and trying to imitate Robbie’s gasping noise.

But this was not a story with a simple happy ending. Robbie could see clear parallels with the cane toads. As they marched, invading, they changed everything before them. The landscape, the way the other animals reacted. Robbie was pretty certain they’d hop clear across the country. Taking what they could, because that was their nature. They were never going to do anything else or be any other way. Maybe the idea of them being poisoned by their own eggs would work. He certainly hoped so.

He took out the orange folder. He was going to do it manually. Finish the stories they had begun together. *Just So You Know, Best Beloved.*

It was fine outside, a beautiful day. He’d walked across the park to get coffee this morning with Brett. Nearly tripped on an ibis darting to chase off a pigeon from some scraps. He’d noticed the coloured bands on its leg. That was a Museum project. Maybe he’d see if he could get involved.
He put the stick nest rat away. He set a photo of Ella in her blue dress, Raver on her shoulder, on one side of his desk. A photo of a frill-necked lizard on the other side. Lizards ate cane toads. Lizards had been around forever. Ecosystems always strove for equilibrium, that was an indisputable fact. But while an invader was in control there was no chance of achieving it. If the invader could be removed, then there might be some changes in the landscape but natural balance stood a chance of being restored.

One of his colleagues poked his head in. “Did you hear? Someone brought the missing exhibits back.”

“That’s great,” said Robbie, meaning it.

“Left them in the endangered species exhibit area,” said the colleague. “Guess they didn’t know what they had! Those specimens were mostly extinct.”

That was the whole point, thought Robbie. The relationship between them. Animals that were extinct served always as reminders for what could happen to those that were endangered.

She would be found, surely. The odds were against her, with so many looking. Nothing could change the past but she would not control the future. He went to the window, for the sheer pleasure of looking out it. There was a daddy-long-legs building an intricate web in one of the corners. So far it was unspoiled by any hapless insect prey. Look around you. It’s all so beautiful, Robbie. He felt joyful. And then? Ella was with him now, for evermore.