

PREVIEW:

Play with Knives: Four:

George and Clare, the Baby and the Bikies

- Jennifer Maiden

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Chapter One:

Hazlitt in Mt Druitt

I doubt if her face ever left my sleep. Any relaxation that had grown in our relationship had gone. Our equanimity seemed to have been much more able to tolerate Clare's fear of me dying from antiquity than it was now able to tolerate my terror of her dying in childbirth.

She was in her first trimester, and we were staying with her mother in Mt Druitt. She was too nauseous in general to want to travel much, and, anyway, we were doing a report for Prisoners of Conscience on Indigenous children in custody in Sydney's Western Suburbs. Being in her early fifties and what the doctors called, annoyingly, an 'Elderly Primigravida' - although that apparently referred to any first mother over thirty five - she was supposed to be extra careful, especially in these early months. In reality, she still alternated between profound ecstasy, profound caution and profound exhaustion, and I never knew which was which without her performing an audio guide for the occasion.

To add to the difficulty, it was the time of a great heatwave, with the temperatures routinely above 110 on the old Fahrenheit scale. Any domestic air-conditioning - including that we had bought for her mother's new house years ago - was pitiful. That day, Clare was sprawled back in her



translucent white cotton kaftan like some slightly round-bellied little Renaissance Venus on a window seat in our bedroom. Two layers of flowery thermal curtains behind her barely masked the shadeless sun. She had a stove-hot laptop beside her, and had been sending the start of her report on the local Juvenile Detention Centre, Cobham, to the usually jaded secretary in our New York office. She said, 'She doesn't believe it, George. I was describing last year's Chisholm Plan, and she went off and researched it independently. Does she think I make things up?'

I said, 'The Chisholm Plan was pretty unbelievable.' Indeed, it had been. The Chisholm Unit was devised to manage the transition of 'High Risk' detainees from another Detention Centre, Kariong, about seventy per cent of whom were Indigenous, and it used frequent Solitary Confinement of lonely adolescent boys as part of its systemic control. The resulting social regression was something you wouldn't see as often in Guantanamo Bay.

Clare said, 'I cant think in this weather. I'm going to look up Hazlitt on Project Gutenberg.' We had been discussing his *Liber Amoris*, because that morning I had been as totally strung out, obsessed and in love as I was at the very first - including the anger - and we remembered how once when she'd just been released from prison, Kenneth Haigh had played *Hazlitt in Love* poignantly on black and white Thames television. She had watched it with my daughter Sheridan at the house I shared in Mt Druitt with my late wife, Heather, and I had apparently been loquacious in my praise of Hazlitt's Nineteenth Century revolutionary sympathies. Now, however, I empathised as much with his ridiculous and magnificent passion for the young and largely indifferent Sarah Walker. Clare said, 'I've never been indifferent. But



you certainly have been ridiculous,' as the morning sun had flamed up from Sydney like something Kipling would have seen as an omen for mayhem.

Now she found the text on Gutenberg, and read out the ending: *'She in fact knows what she is, and recoils from the good opinion or sympathy of others, which she feels to be founded on a deception; so that my overweening opinion of her must have appeared like irony, or direct insult. My seeing her in the street has gone a good way to satisfy me. Her manner there explains her manner in-doors to be conscious and overdone; and besides, she looks but indifferently. She is diminutive in stature, and her measured step and timid air do not suit these public airings. I am afraid she will soon grow common to my imagination, as well as worthless in herself. Her image seems fast "going into the wastes of time," like a weed that the wave bears farther and farther from me. Alas! thou poor hapless weed, when I entirely lose sight of thee, and for ever, no flower will ever bloom on earth to glad my heart again!'*

The temperature of the day meant that we were both covered in a skin of cooler sweat, and I've noticed before that this condition also makes it more likely one produce extra moisture from crying. At any rate, by the time she'd finished reading, we held hands in tears, and I was reassuring her that the physical and emotional description of Sarah never had the smallest connection in my mind with she, herself. She said, 'He really milks it, though, doesn't he? I suppose he got that from Montaigne. No wonder the Victorians didn't like it.'

I said, 'Some of them did, but the great age of pornography was about to begin, and that isn't a good genre for enlightened erotic defeat. He would



have understood that. He really was a great social critic. Michael Foot revered him.'

Our emotion had overcome the weather's compulsion towards self-isolation, and we stayed sitting tightly together, not really more heat-cloyed, since the sweat became as insignificant as it might have been in actual sex.

Our sex at that time was mainly foreplay with orgasms, and a feeling of constant reprieve that the resulting contractions in her lower body never seemed to be related at all to miscarriage. She said, 'If Ruth and Sophie and Florence are coming, will I have to put on more clothes? I don't know how we'll handle people, anyway. We seem to be clinically labile.'

I said, 'We'll blame the weather. Everyone is labile in this weather. It's a better excuse than booze. And you can't really see through the kaftan. Just put on some light-coloured briefs. Or I could...?'

But she put them on herself: 'It's too hot. Anyway, we should watch Idris' TV show in case he and Anna do something else to break Sophie's heart.'

Idris was still taking refuge in Moscow since some of the people he'd hacked apparently remained rather deadly. His initial dismissal of the Russians as only offering military honours and a Moscow TV show had proved to be too cavalier. Anyway, I didn't know if he was a full Colonel in the KGB, like Kim Philby, by now - I suspected they might draw the line at someone like my grandson - but he did have his own TV interview show, streamed weekly on its own Internet site. *Moscow Nights with Red Idris*. It was the sight of him singing *Smuglyanka* in a duet on bar stools with Anna Chapman that had decided Sophie he needed her in Russia.



Sophie was bringing Florence to Clare's Mother's place that afternoon to say goodbye before they left, and at about the same time our old Darug friend, Ruth, was going to visit. Ruth was in her late seventies but still supervising a couple of women's refuges, and one of the local Indigenous choirs. She was initially coming over to see us again, and to tell us about two of her great grandsons in Cobham for our report, but now she wanted to confide even more, as another of her great grandchildren - a girl toddler - had been declared missing that morning. We were still hoping it was some sort of intricate family dispute, and would have a benign outcome.

On Idris' site, he was interviewing Jeremy Corbyn, and there was no trace of Anna. I gathered the flurry of intervening emails had been fairly French and furious. Idris was repeating his Gen Y declaration never to trust anyone under sixty-five. Clare gave it a 'Like', and teased me: 'Jeremy is just as sexy as Anna, anyway.' I mimicked 'The legs, the legs...' from Trump's immortal bus conversation, by saying, 'The teeth, the teeth...' There was no doubt that relative success suited Corbyn, though. He seemed even more relaxed about speaking thoughtfully with affection, and the snaggle tooth now just looked like something such a survivor could get away with: clearly the women who mattered most to him did like it well enough.

I opened the door for Sophie and Florence. As usual, the little girl flew straight to Clare's arms, and Sophie and I went off to the kitchen to make coffee. In this weather, I'd already left cold coffee in the percolater, and we poured it into glasses over ice and milk from the fridge. She had brought her customary wilted cheese croissants, and I realised again that absolutely nothing sweats like cheese. Fortunately, Clare's mother, Coral, arrived back at that moment with a bag of supermarket bread and sugary biscuits.



Florence ran in to kiss her, and Coral's response was more directly physical than it would ever be with Clare. I amended: had ever been with Clare, but then I checked myself, as Clare would not have liked that: the start of an excuse.

Coral had developed an unlikely interest in internet hacking and mirroring technology, probably because of her general sympathy for Sophie, and they went into the lounge room, directly under the main air-conditioner and discussed how Sophie would continue mirroring Idris' hacking activities when she and the baby were in Moscow. The inescapable hot weather seemed to underline the inevitability of every other thing, and I realised that Florence would always be 'our baby' and that - whatever devout deals he might have done with Russia - Idris would be hacking any power in power forever.

Clare and Florence knew all this already, and were watching *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* on Florence's phone on the floor. Everyone liked that bit where all seems lost, but Miss Peregrine, about to morph and be caged, declares, 'No one tells my children what to do!'

Sophie could never go long without an electronic Idris fix, and she began typing to him again. He responded at once, contritely. Then I greeted the boy as he grinned in the starry, shadowy snow in front of an ornate religious onion. No one mentioned Anna Chapman.

No one mentioned Clare's pregnancy either, probably for fear of tempting fate, but as she left with her mother, Florence hugged Clare again and whispered, 'I hope it's a girl!' and Clare nodded. She wouldn't have an ultrasound, out of scruples about side-effects, but the old demographic rule - Western Suburbs mothers want girls, North Shore mothers want boys - had



probably prevailed again automatically. And when she had murdered her siblings as a child, she had only spent time decorating her brother, so I supposed there might still be some dormant anxiety in her, if this child were a boy.

Ruth arrived in time to farewell the others on the steps. She gave us another bag of biscuits, and Florence and Sophie some to take to the airport. Coral was going with them, to bring back the car. Florence began eating the biscuits at once. The heat had made them taste newly baked, before it permanently sogged them.

Back inside, Ruth was clinging to her phone as if it were a mother's hand, both for any news of her missing great grand-daughter, and because music videos were reassuring and sustained her subliminal concentration. Her husband - an invalid - had died a few years ago, and she seemed to have suddenly inherited his taste for Country Music. It was a taste prevalent in Indigenous people of her generation, but I noticed that the ubiquitous Slim Dusty had been replaced by the iconic Hank Williams. She was playing and replaying a video of a 1950s duet Williams had sung of '*I Can't Help It If I'm Still in Love With You*' with Anita Carter, niece of the great Sara Carter and youngest daughter of the inventive guitarist, Mother Maybelle.

After years of Indigenous clients and investigations, I could always hold a detailed and non-patronising conversation on Country Music (Maybelle's self-taught technical innovations were actually staggering), and in this case both the duet and the gossip about it were usefully distracting. I commented, handing out iced coffee, 'Carter's wail there is actually so powerful that Williams is able to sing out the other half of a real duet, not just provide that subdued harmony most male singers use in a duet with a woman.'



Ruth was reassured by my interest. Clare said, peering at the screen, 'It may be to compensate for her power, then, but she's acting as if she's besotted with him.'

Ruth said, 'He seems to reciprocate, but maybe he's taking it too seriously. Look, he switches off the emotion too soon.' The song ended and she automatically replayed it.

I added: 'And at some point proposed to her. She knocked him back, of course, but to be fair that was under the peregrine eye of Mother Maybelle - whose doubts were confirmed pretty soon. He accidentally almost shot one of her other daughters, while aiming at his wife.'

Ruth nodded, 'Audrey.' The public celebrity gossip, of course, was an initiation ritual for us all to confide private facts, and Ruth did so. She said, 'Charlotte has been gone for a week, but no one told me until yesterday, and I phoned Harry Terrence.' Harry now being a Deputy Commissioner had never made him any less the favorite sane old local policeman, and everyone's last resort. I still had the Glock he'd sent me when I was protecting Idris.

I asked, 'Who might have her?'

Ruth shrugged: 'Brother and cousin in Cobham on Darug side. Drug debts and insurance against dobbing, maybe. Biekie connections on white side. Her father is white. I don't like him.'

Clare asked, 'Did he take her?'

'Not himself. His girlfriend doesn't like her. His girlfriend's on the game, though, and so's his sister. There may be some stuff about territory. Her



mother didn't kill her. Tyffanie wouldn't do anything like that. I brought her up. But she's too trusting.'

Clare asked, 'What about her partner?'

'Left last year. Made some threats.' She was crying without knowing it: 'Tyff says he hasn't got her. I can feel in the *air* that she's alive.'

'Then she is,' I said.

Clare looked at me with judicious approval, and then added, 'We'll find out what we can tomorrow. We're seeing Larry Nicholls, anyway.'

Larry was a crim of the true antique vintage, against whom no one had *yet* got any proof, and of course was an expert on the alumni of Cobham. Although he wouldn't know where Charlotte was, there was a fair chance he could indicate some directions to look. But it was important not to search too quickly and clumsily, and cause anyone to take dangerous precautions. Ruth would have had the same thought, because she phoned Harry first.

Clare suddenly went livid and clammy, shivering in the heat. Ruth caught her before I could, and she lent on Ruth's shoulder to walk. In the bathroom, she put her forehead to the lukewarm, china tub and stayed there, as her legs must have numbed, listening to Ruth's store of anecdotes and legends about the hell of the first trimester. She didn't throw up. I brought ice in a towel and forced myself not to remember all the women who had died or nearly died in childbirth, including one poor wretch I'd met at Windsor once when they forgot to drain the drip.



Chapter Two:

And, suddenly, the guns

Crux, the Pointers, and a thousand other stars, burned white as magnesium in the lingering last dusk, as if they had at last been fed by the impossible white sun, now set red, dry, seeming a high cliff in a desert. The desert wind - a real khamsin - was low as the flock of parrots, whimpering and whistling, surprising in its individual soars and plunges. But it blew no colder now. Clare and Ruth sat with George on the baked brick steps behind the back porch, talking about prisons. Three cats, saved by Clare and sent from Kos, sprawled on the grass. The black skinny dog from Egypt slept, too, twitching. Clare crouched on the actual arid, clay-smelling earth, her back pressed below George, sharply. George sat on the second step, didn't know if stroking her head on his knee were too patronising, too clumsy, instead held her head at the curve of the neck, under her hair's damp, stranded silver-white. Ruth was singing in dulcet contralto, under her breath, some comforting Hank Williams song in Darug. Clare recognised the word for 'heart', joined in, with her quiet treble, having learned as a child



some Darug words from her stepsister, Janice, who also she had murdered. On the steps, they had discussed how hot it would have been today at Cobham, no matter how much air-conditioning. That place was set out wide in very low blond brick on the Werrington flood plain. It must have cooked for a week: the sense of the outside heat piercing through to the spines of the inmates, skewering them like lizards to building-block -shaped lounges and their beds . Ruth stopped her song and asked, depressed, 'Tomorrow, at Cobham, will you see my little boy?' Meaning the youngest great-grandchild. An instruction, not request. Clare allowed her neckbone to press against George's thumb, and promised 'We will. He's a sweet kid.' George knew that she wanted the pressure to cut off blood and thought, but the flesh was too slippery from sweat. He agreed, 'Yes. He's not, I think, in Solitary. What must it be like to be in the Unit in weather like this that makes everything psychotic?' Ruth shrugged in awful irony: 'At least his cousin's there, too. They would have missed each other over Christmas.' Clare's mother's keys clinked round the front. Clare stood. She and Ruth went in together. George stayed, remembered being married to Heather, and sitting alone drunk outside



in the nasturtiums, while she lived her life, and did her work, accepted. Now there was the smell of lilies, noon-scorched: calla not canna, sprung from clay not salt. He was heartened imagining what Clare would say if he chose for himself now any such solitary sentence.

Ruth gone, Clare returned again, this time above him on the steps. She said, 'Mum said goodnight. She's got heat-exhaustion. I made her drink iced water', then showed him the glass carafe and punch-cups. They drank some. *It is still so hot you have to remember to drink*, she thought. At his laugh, 'We could do foreplay with the ice-cubes, but I'd probably have a heart attack at the contrast', she found she had blushed, was shocked by her own tremor. But soon she considered: shock was specific to time: a mother's house, the confronting heatwave, George in clean-shirt, neat-margin mode - Mt. Druitt mode - and this self-conscious sweat on everything. She had meant to think about sex, anyway, when she had time, feeling the new pressure from the leaning womb, feeling odd when her feet defined the strangeness of the ground. Her labia had unpetalled a little, open more now around the clitoris, and the vaginal tunnel almost breathed more freely, as if in slow tune with her heart. The openness



seemed paradoxical, since their penetration had been cautious and shallow for a while. She thought perhaps that caution had informed his manner, perhaps that feeling of the measured-out, not sudden, but at any rate the sex stayed thoughtful, and as at the first he seemed comfortable with wry deliberation, despite their emotions round the house being operatic. They held hands now, as the evening cooled less frantic, and the Southern Cross engorged above them, its stars big as the flag once made of it for Eureka. 'It's the first time I've seen it look like the flag,' she said, 'It's funny. When I think of the rebellion, it's that Peter Lalor ended up so long in Parliament. I forget the thirty dead.' George said, 'It was a real ambush. The police had spies and shot the men at midnight.' He heard his voice sound factual and sad, in keeping with the humid evanescence.

And suddenly, the guns.

Three volleys of automatic shots, probably only a block or two away and bike wheels in guttural crescendo on the crumbling swollen tar. 'We're going in,' said Clare then, scooped up the three Greek cats. George and the dog leapt up and looked in each other's eyes with resignation. The light in the lounge went on, and they followed Clare inside, the dog



still quivering from sleep. Clare's mother, in a blue soft satin wrap, disentangled cats, with patience. As they waited for the sirens, Clare said, 'Someone didn't pay for something.' George shrugged, 'Well, they have now,' as the wheels outside shrieked past.

Chapter Three:

Vintage Crims

Clare's pensive mermaid face was turned to Larry Nicholls, who these days in his late seventies was survival-wizened, with an alcoholic crop of frosty curls, and a confidence satisfied from hardly a day in prison. As often with vintage crims, an adoring and still comely old blonde lady made us all tea, and then watched him attentively with experienced anxiety, as she had for the last fifty years she hadn't been married to him.

He gave us his anecdotal list that his lady had typed and printed out for him about local recidivists. A lot were also suicides: sometimes by drugs, cars, diabetes - occasionally by cop or police chase.

The air-conditioning in the pensioner unit was full blast so that the place sounded like a laundromat, sometimes drowning out his wrinkled old whisper: 'I had a beer with Harry Terrence last week. He said you two were still together. Harry and I both reckon you're taking this Probation thing too seriously, Mr. Jeffreys.'

He was never going to call me 'George', and I didn't ask him to. In these circumstances, I needed to be Mr. Jeffreys, with every inch I could create of



the sullen awe my ancestor must have inspired as Hanging Judge at the Monmouth Assizes. Not that Larry was sullen. He was eager to have any sort of conversation.

Clare said, 'He's having a Client Termination problem, but he's not in Probation now. We're both working for Prisoners Of Conscience. We wanted you to tell us more about Cobham.'

He said, 'I'm a bit old now for Cobham. Don't you want to know what the shooting in Acacia Place was all about? You must have heard it last night?'

I said, 'It was just debt-collecting, wasn't it? They only shot the elder son through the front door, and burned the house down?' We had driven past the smouldering brick veneer half an hour ago. 'It was the Warriors from Hell again?' They had been observed gathering solemnly at their clubhouse in Kingswood this morning.

Clare discerned something in his expression quickly, before I did, and asked: 'It had something to do with Charlotte Traske?' By now the papers were calling the child, 'Lost Charlotte', with an unintentional but forlorn air of finality. In her photographs, she was a pretty little girl with frightened eyes. Larry nodded sharply and respectfully, as if Clare had played a successful poker hand.

He said, 'The father's a Warrior. Wants her back, that's what I heard. But someone's got something on the Warriors, or there's some shipment of something at stake... maybe. Something imported. They want the Warriors to co-operate, stay quiet or something. But you've got some mavericks there, like last night. And, of course, the young feller did owe them money, too. Maybe it was just that?'



Clare asked, 'Was Charlotte in Acacia Place?'

He said, with casual certainty, 'No.'

I asked, 'Who were the Acacia Place people?'

'Tongan family - Koloi. But the place was owned by a guy called Schmidt. I think that was his real name, too.'

I asked, 'Anyone Darug?'

'Only on the mother's side. I don't know anything about that. You'd be better asking the Cobham kids this arvo.'

So we did.

The Juvenile Justice Centre was the largest in the State, and it had that low, compact schoolhouse air I had learned to associate with organised ferocity.

Clare and I were meeting Philip Antonelli and Elinor Kent there. Philip had once run Probation in this area, then become a Priest, and was now a compulsively active retired Priest and Immigrant Advocate. Elinor had his old job - which had been mine for a while, too - at Probation. They had known each other for about fifty years. Today, she was checking up on some potential clients, and he was interviewing the younger brother of a Pacific Island bikie who had now shot a couple of people: another bikie in debt to him, and someone's Tongan grandmother. He had begun as one of Antonelli's rescue projects.

I said to Antonelli: 'It wouldn't be the first time you'd saved a man and created a monster.'

He deflected the observation with a provocative sophistry unusual for him :



'But you saved a woman and created an angel'. I caught her elbow quickly, to save his life. She looked at me, with much the same expression as when she learned I probably saved George Bush Junior with a Heimlich manoeuvre.

As far as he was concerned, my response should probably have been that she had saved me instead, but that would have been equally fatal, so I gave one of my well-crafted exasperated sighs and said, 'No one saved anyone, and no one is angelic.' The pulse in her radial head subsided a little, and she shrugged with the other shoulder. Anyway, Elinor was approaching us across the vast overcut institutional lawn.

Antonelli's face couldn't hide his unease. His body braced.

I said to him, 'I've always told you everything would change if you ever fell in love.'

He smiled, 'Yes, indeed. You can watch *me* suffer now.' I said, 'But if you're the one in love, you have the advantage over the beloved. It increases your perception.'

He smiled slightly and wanly: 'I hadn't thought about it like that.' And added, somewhat happier: 'You're right, of course.'

Elinor looked at my grip on Clare's elbow with a perfectly raised perfect eyebrow, and I risked all and let Clare go. Clare, however, went into her mildly mocking obedient mode at the site of another of her former Probation Officers - although she and Elinor had developed a close friendship over time. Elinor went public to us about her relationship with Antonelli by walking straight over to him, ruffling up his sleeve, holding his wrist and looking at the time on his wristwatch. I understood that the natural, passive



way in which he accepted this also indicated that their relationship had been in place for more than a day or so.

I said, 'When I'm in love, I like to make it work for me, not the person I'm in love with.' I was still irritated when Clare did her demure routine with an authority figure, especially since I wasn't an authority figure any more.

The institution inside had a terrible quietness, like a place for the dead. There were about eighty prisoners, but the tight supervision and elevated ceilings made the population seem sparse, as if being here were depressingly special.

Ruth's 'little boy', Jimmy, was fifteen - the youngest age possible to be here - and seemed even younger, but had the extraordinarily, implacably beautiful face of photographs of his initiated ancestors: wide, unyielding mouth, with lower lip either jutting or pressed by two mischievous front teeth, nose a sensitive strong triangle like a stoical boxer, tall forehead, scrappy black hair, and wideset black eyes that were fearless, suffering and endlessly discerning . He also had an estranged, ethereal coping quality that made me realise again how it might have have been to see the very young child Clare in prison.

He must have reminded her of that, too, because her body suddenly seemed remote in posture, her skin not shrinking but with an indrawn aura, incapable of touching. He saw this at once - all Ruth's family were aware of Clare's history - and reached his hand to rest on her arm. We were all sitting with some freedom of movement in a cyclamen and green lounge area under the gaze of a pretty guard in a glass office-box . Out of pure impulse, I put my



hand on his as it rested on her arm, and none of us changed in that situation for five minutes.

His childhood violence hadn't been as directed as hers, but longer, more untidy. He had helped perpetrate several muggings, traded stolen crystal meths for cash and sweets, and finally committed the unforgivable by literally putting the boot repeatedly into a policeman who had been tripped up by his cousin.

Clare incarnated again by focusing on him and asking, 'What was it like in Solitary? I was never in Solitary.' She had been subjected to most other conceivable tortures, of course, including shock conditioning, but for some reason they hadn't isolated her for long lengths of time. Perhaps she had already conveyed such an illusive powerful self-isolation - as well as an unusually normal ability to socialise - that it didn't ever really occur to them.

He said, 'Lonely. And you can't sleep. You don't know what's going to come in at you, with no one else watching. And then you realise you've been talking to your mother or something. You try counting, but it hurts, you know? Counting numbers actually hurts your head. And you have all this stuff to say that you didn't before - but then you forget it, and you know once you forget it you won't be yourself any more - you'll be crazy. Then they shove food at you, but they won't answer you and you know whatever happens you'll still be a piece of shit they can ignore whenever they're too lazy to mop it up.' He spoke slowly, in a light voice, without rancour, into a recorder Clare held out to him.

Before we left, we were also allowed to speak to his cousin, Trent, and we asked them about Charlotte. They spoke of her in a tone as if she were



indeed their little sister, and, like Ruth, they thought her alive, but, unlike Ruth, they thought she was probably just in the clutches of her father, who was 'a mean bastard - either rips you off or knocks the crap out of you.' And was apparently just the sort of person with whom Tyffanie always fell in love.

' "Trusting" doesn't quite cover it', said Clare, as we left them and regained our briefcases in the corridor.

I said, 'But you can see that Ruth is a bit proud that someone like Tyff can afford a luxury like trust. Ruth was in Nowra Children's Home and then Cootamundra Girls'. There are a lot of grandparents like that here, still, ashamed of all sorts of traumatised sillinesses and pathologies. You learned to mop floors, shut up, and trust was a fantasy. She shoplifted when she was younger to even up the game.'

Antonelli and Elinor met us in the parking lot - holding hands, God help them. Clare looked pleased by that. We farewelled them cheerfully, but I could see the heat and the place were overcoming her. I helped her to the car, and she sat on the edge of the bath towel on the hot vinyl seat and vomited abruptly, grabbing up the towel under her mouth, and then dry retching helplessly as I knelt and held her wet forehead steady. When she at last swung her legs into the car, she turned on the radio news. A couple of Pacific Island kids were to face extra charges for occupying a Cobham roof recently, Donald Trump was surviving yet another revelation about Russia (I would have to check it out with Idris) and the body of a little girl had been found in her mother's carboot at Tregear.

But she was an older, white child, and the search for Lost Charlotte went on.



Chapter Four

Ectogenesis

Clare curled on the death-blue doublebed in the breath-small guest bedroom, her jaundiced cheek fluttering against a pillowcase aquamarine with sea things, all too close. Her midnight sapphire gaze flitted between George and the ceiling, vaguely malarial, and shut its eyelids as the airconditioner wedged in the shaking glass of the window, beside her, cut motor but then fought back at the sun like a labouring ox. She, still nauseous from the first trimester, and Cobham, drank some tepid water that George offered, still with her eyes shut, then gave a sucked-in moan, a sound as if from foreplay, he thought, not actual sex. But foreplay was sex, of course: who was to say what stage of any human act was the actual one? He joked, 'Hitchcock said, "Give them pleasure - the same pleasure they have when



they wake up from a nightmare." But you don't seem that pleased.'

He pushed soaking hair from her forehead, to touch her. 'What

did you dream?' he asked. She said, 'That's a masochistic

question. I should invent something two hours long,

involving a giraffe. But, actually, I wasn't asleep. I kept

saying to myself those lines, again and again: "This was

the parting that they had/ Beside the haystack in the floods."

He said, 'William Morris, but not about chintz. At the end,

they cut the hero's throat, crush in his head, and send

the heroine to be witch-drowned in the Seine: Jehane.'

She said, 'I don't remember where I read it.' He said, 'But

I know. It's in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, in the first

house your mother had, when I visited her to check

on your background when you were in prison.' 'One

of my stepfathers must have left it. Yes, that is

where the poem came from. But why has it been

tormenting me since Cobham?' She had taken his hand

and placed it low at her stomach, on her dress. He let

her control it, absently squeeze his knuckles, separate



the fingers, grip and stretch them. The vomit smell was slightly sour in the air, but not unpleasant: more like that of an afternoon kindergarten, mild vinegar. She asked, 'Were you turned on by my throwing up?', her expression tremulous, but evilly amused. He always answered questions about sex seriously these days, subduing mechanisms of defence he had taken decades to develop. He said, 'When I was at Uni, before I married Heather, I drank down raw alcohol for a dare or something, then vomited all night in the bath while she held me, mopped my face. After that, it seemed inevitable somehow that we wed. I suppose that was like a foreplay ritual, sexual, even more than actual adolescent sex.' Clare smiled, 'It sounds lucky you're not blind.' She had left his hand to rest over her clitoris through the dress, and brushed his arm with her fingers, as if reassuring: he wasn't sure about what. He re-animated his own hand and rubbed her through the cotton, but continuing to talk. He asked, 'Is it pillow talk if the conversation involves



so much investigation?' She answered, ' But pillow talk is so different from person to person. With us, it is about catching runaway reality - with a spy, it would be just about government secrets, or something. And sometimes people do talk about sex. That's more fun in penetration, though, because of the contrast between the words and the physical, how each of them causes and disturbs the other.' The window beside her was dimly shrouded in thermal florals like a desperate apron, but its sun made her look like a laughing Renoir girl in some backlit exhibition, and her beauty spontaneously stang in his diaphragm without preparation, so that he gathered her up to him clumsily, perhaps just to escape the pain of it. The gesture was so complete that she was peripheral around it, working out what to do with herself in response. She closed her hands together behind his shirt, not knowing even if he could feel that, but they were chest to chest, and the beat of heart on heart at first made each



unsynchronised in pace until after slow minutes
the two beats magnified and fell in unison, her head
hard as stone against his throat, until she began
to weep in ragged paroxysms, for no reason,
she thought at this moment, so she calmed and said,
'I didn't think I was one of those people who like
tears as foreplay, but then I suppose if the pillow talk
is of body fluids, it's better than throwing up.' His mouth
felt dry on her hair. She thought: sometimes it is as if it does
feel, the hair, as it seems that animals see colour. George
moved his lips down, over her ear and to her shoulder, quick
because slow would have been too sensual, and she would
perhaps have squirmed away or stilled. Still, she tested
the freedom of her arms in his, not wanting him at that
moment to control the foreplay. She forced her hand
under his ribs to rest it on his penis. D.H.Lawrence
would have thought it a contest, she reflected, but
George's had a canine quality: alert and trusting, safe.
He loosened his arms, understood, and she bent her head,



used her mouth for a few seconds, not to end things too soon, but to show she wasn't docile. He kissed her mouth then, tasted something again like tin flavour of river water, quite unlike her ocean. The sun furnaced outside and the air conditioner gave them no more than the air ripple from a tree. She would rest on his arm, curled her body to his tasting, came the first time with head crouched tight against her shoulder: an exhaustion not a crucifixion pose. Her nipples still looked and smelled like rose. Then he seemed uncertain for direction and she chose: when they came together they were side by side, not set scythed but straight, his arms beneath her breasts. After, it was he who appeared encrossed: spread out like a falcon on the bed's sky-finality, hands lifeless from the accustomed hunt and achieved purpose. She had curled up once more: 'Maybe with the *Haystack in the Floods*, it was in the heat and I was just trying to think about water...' He said, I've been thinking about those lines



I like from Cecil Day-Lewis about "The blind collisions that ensure Soul's *Ektogenesis*." She said, 'I like that, but I'm never sure if he means growth out, or growth begun outside. With a baby, ectogenesis means it growing outside you in a test tube, lab or something. I suppose that might make one feel it was safer.' 'It's safer with you,' said George. She was finally sleepy. She asked, 'Will you try to go around to Tyffanie's to find out more about Lost Baby?' He agreed: 'But I haven't been there for years. Now, what's it like?' She said, 'Well, when I was round there, she'd still kept all the husband's bikie stuff, in case he might come back and beat her. As well as Scientology, he was into Satanism, so there were posters for that around, and pictures, but mostly those were really sweet and pretty: Rosaleen Norton, you know. And Tyff said they were married at the Wayside Chapel. Charlotte was there then, but Ruth was carrying her, and I didn't take much notice...' Trying to remember Charlotte's face, she slept. It was too hot to put a rug around her. George ran his hand



down the length of her body lightly, and then left,
making sure she could reach the tumbler without
knocking it over in the sun's flooded unconscious.

Chapter Five:

The Haystack in the Floods

I tried to reassure myself that Charlotte hadn't been sacrificed on an altar somewhere, as I admired Tyffanie's inherited Rosaleen Norton collection. Roie had still been alive and living famously (no longer notoriously) in King's Cross when I was a Parramatta High student, and it was a nostalgia-kick to see her work again. I'd spoken with her enthusiastically once, and Clare's adjectives 'sweet and pretty' had still been accurate. Also kind-hearted. And she'd been still sexy in a fashion-smart, street-smart 1930s-movie way that seemed much more like *film noir* than witchcraft. The self-portraits showed her with full fruit-bowl breasts, but I remembered - having stared transfixedly at them - that they were a bit smaller and suppler, like Clare's now.

I wondered why Andrew and Tyffanie Traske had been collecting Norton prints, rather than more modern and garish forms of Satanism. Although,of



course, the obligatory animal skulls and candelabra sat carefully dusted on the walnut cabinets.

I asked, 'Why did you start collecting Norton prints?'

Tyffanie was in such a state of prolonged desperation that she'd answer anything accurately from anybody, and let them judge the relevance. She answered, 'They suggested her at the Wayside Chapel. Someone there gave us one as a wedding present. I suppose they thought she was harmless. Andy had been arrested chiselling bits off gravestones. And I actually thought even that was safer than badging all those Mercedes.'

Despite my op shop mind, I didn't ask what ritual used Mercedes badges. I asked, 'Did any of the rituals involve children?'

It seemed as if that obvious possibility hadn't occurred to her, because she gasped as if winded and then became angry: 'Never. The only thing was that I heard his sister and his mother had to leave Queensland because the police were after them asking about a baby being sacrificed. They always do that with Satanists. But I don't think there was anything to it. Andy was with me at the time. We've been together since we were fifteen.'

I was looking at the Norton prints. The nudes were certainly much sexier than Norman Lindsay's, painted slightly earlier than Norton. Clare had told me once that Norton's work reminded her of early children's book illustrations, such as Ida Renthoul Outhwaite's, in stories she had read to Florence. I could see what she meant. They had a twisting energy that spired upward, and the ascendant woman-mounted hyppogryphs, prised trees, erotic master-elves and cat-faced nudes showed elated, confident purpose. I had realised early in my relationship with Clare that all ecstasy, not just the



directly sexual, is an adult emotion and, whatever else, the Nortons showed an experienced, self-accepting eager calm. I was reminded of that face of the man inhabited by hell-minions in the painting by Hieronymous Bosch.

I soothed, 'If there were evidence about infanticide, it would have crossed the Queensland border.'

She said, 'Yes', as if I had instantly become her ally. She didn't have many of those. Most of her neighbours seemed to think she had borne Charlotte as fodder for some bokie *sabbat*. It fitted with their feelings about bikies: a mixture of fear, impatience and clan acceptance. And none of the neighbours were Indigenous. Tyffanie's bruises would have seemed part of an exotic but over-familiar way of life.

She had no bruises at the moment, so I assumed Andrew hadn't been visiting. I asked her where he was.

She said 'He's back here, I think - well - living at Oberon, anyway. He's some sort of Security Guard at Jenolan Caves. Brit' - his sister - 'is on the game in Lithgow'.

I said, 'I can think of easier places to be on the game...' but the wire door clacked in the heat and I finished less casually: 'Speak of the devil,' as Andrew walked in.

Tyff whispered 'Hello, Andy Pandy' with the same petrified cuteness the Greeks must have evinced when referring to the Furies as the Sweet Ones. Then her face gently disassociated, and she looked like her cousin Jimmy in Cobham.



Andrew fetched some beer from the kitchen. it was one of those thin low alcohol ones that seem to make you drunk instantly. Tyff had forgotten to offer me anything to eat or drink, and I had genuinely forgotten to notice.

I didn't anticipate violence - wife-beaters hardly ever take on other men - but I was determined to outstay his visit to make sure she was safe - unless, God forbid, they had a reconciliation.

I hadn't thought he was under the influence of drugs, but the beer triggered something and his legs were now a bit splayed and unsteady. He held the edge of a walnut table tightly, displacing an ornate photo of Tyff holding Charlotte, and his face became inflamed. I said, with strategic paternal exasperation, 'I've had a tough day, Andrew. I don't need an ice attack as well.' He seemed to have an ambivalent relationship with his literally satanic female relatives, but there was no evidence he hadn't been straightforwardly fond of his father. I didn't stand up, but eased my glass down, crossed my arms and pursed my lips.

He shouted, 'You're going to put me back in Bathurst!'

I said, not speaking quickly: 'I'm not in Probation anymore. I'm working for Prisoners of Conscience. I'd be trying to get you out of Bathurst.' Not as a top priority, though.

He pointed his glass at me - fortunately it wasn't broken and jagged - and then lunged straight down at me. The half-full glass hit my mouth and my mouth bled against my bottom teeth, with a swollen stinging. I put my head back, gave a theatrical sigh and put his glass beside mine. Everything reeked of diluted yeast and barley, as if something hadn't fermented properly. I braced myself, but not for another onslaught - well, not an aggressive one.



He slumped forward on his knees, with his head rolling back and forth against my legs, and sobbed in horror.

Without my asking, he said, 'I don't know where Charlotte is. I don't know where Charlotte is.'

I asked, 'But it's the Warriors from Hell?'

He said, 'Not the Committee. It might be the Orchard Hills branch, but I offered to pay them the money back soon. I don't think so.'

I stabbed in the dark and connected, remembering who Larry Nicholls had said was the owner of the Kolois burnt house in Acacia Place:

'Is Schmidt involved?'

Tyffanie gave a moaning cry, as if all hope was over. Andrew seemed at once completely sobered: 'I was courier up the coast for one of his lovers, and I realised they were dobbing on him somewhere. I don't know whether it was to the police or someone else - a rival. he might know I know something about it.' His tone underlined that he wasn't going to say who - or even what gender - the lover was. But that would be the information Schmidt wanted, if Schmidt indeed had Charlotte. Or it might still be the Orchard Hills branch. At least it seemed less likely it was her white Gran and Auntie, the Devil Worshipers, I thought, with uneasy relief.

Andrew went over to the couch and curled up, sleeping. Tyffanie covered him with a pink throw rug and asked me, 'Will you drive him to the station?'



I agreed, 'I'll drop him off at Penrith Station for the Mt.Victoria Passenger, and Brit can pick him up at Mt.Victoria.' Even after so long, I still retained a Probation Officer's mental train time-table.

I joined Tyff in the humid kitchen, where she was making a packet of cheese and lettuce sandwiches for him. She gave me slices of supermarket Gouda, reassuring 'It isn't one of the recalled ones.'

I had just begun to look out the window into the sun-blitzed back yard, when thunder rumbled darkly from nowhere, and rain streaked in lateral lumps against the pane. A chihuahua that had been rolling around under a vast stack of cut dry grass quickly jumped on top of that, as puddles grew into wells around it. I remembered Clare: 'This was the parting that they had/ Beside the haystack in the floods.'

The little dog on top of the haystack began turning in circles, looking around for something, turning in circles, looking around for something.

Tyffanie explained, 'He used to do that for Charlotte'.

And I promised Clare in my head: 'I will find her.'

