



Play With Knives: Four: George and Clare, the Baby and the Bikies

ISBN: 978-0-9954181-5-8

© Jennifer Maiden, 2017

© Cover by Jennifer Maiden

© Quemar Press name and © Quemar Press Logo

<http://quemarpress.weebly.com/>

ABN 75691360521

Other work by Jennifer Maiden published online by Quemar Press:

Play With Knives

Play With Knives: Two: Complicity

Play With Knives: Three: George and Clare and the Grey Hat Hacker

The Metronome



Play with Knives:

Four:

George and Clare, the Baby and the Bikies

Jennifer Maiden



Preface

Play With Knives: Four: George and Clare, the Baby and the Bikies

juxtaposes prose and verse, combining them and illuminating the thriller in a continuous pace and pattern - but as well as being a 'thriller' *Play With Knives: Four* is something wild and undefinable - glinting in the dark like an animal spirit or a quantum diamond.

Through verse, in the heatwave wind on backsteps, the heroes Clare and George are asked to visit a fifteen year old Indigenous boy incarcerated in a Western Suburbs Correctional Centre. In prose, George promises to find a missing baby, while watching her dog still perform tricks for her. Through verse, in the winter's 'spinning stars', the heroes learn why a drug and telecommunications criminal organiser is concerned with diamonds that could be used for quantum computing. At night, In prose, they attempt to rescue the missing baby from the criminals in an actual cave in the N.S.W. Blue Mountains named after the god Baal. In verse, the pregnant hero Clare goes into labour in an early spring of 'shivering wattle'.

The third person verse presents and facilitates mysterious true-to-life processes within the plot, such as spontaneous beauty, coincidence or



serendipity. In the plot Clare experiences an empathetic dream-vision about Jimmy, the boy at the Correctional Centre, and an apple half from an anti-miscarriage spell turns into an apple plant, when it might not. Another aspect of the verse is the explicit love imagery between George and Clare, which is always in-keeping with the verse's encompassing aesthetic quality. The first person prose is a force for incarnate description and present action.

On another level, nothing in the novel, and neither Clare nor George, are compartmentalised in any way. As a child, the female hero, Clare murdered her siblings and feels she can only survive by acknowledging her murders and not being forgiven, especially not by the hero George, her former Probation officer. That everything stays connected is vital to them. Anything that happens in the verse shades the prose, and the two forms blend for the reader, incarnating the verse and expanding the prose, creating characters who wish to be complete in humanity, and also creating an unfragmented, unexpected thriller - or a work which again escapes all genres.

Katharine Margot Toohey

QUEMAR PRESS



Contents:

Chapter One: Hazlitt in Mount Druitt	8
Chapter Two: And, suddenly, the guns	20
Chapter Three: Vintage Crims	26
Chapter Four: Ectogenesis	35
Chapter Five: The Haystack in the Floods	44
Chapter Six: It was always to you that I made my promises	51
Chapter Seven: Schmidt's Lover	58
Chapter Eight: The followers of Pan	70
Chapter Nine: The Self-Guiding Cave	75
Chapter Ten: The Little Australian Raven	83
Chapter Eleven: Another Lover	87
Chapter Twelve: Jimmy on the Roof	95



Chapter Thirteen: Don't Forget the Lithgow Coven	100
Chapter Fourteen: It was still me who killed the children	107
Chapter Fifteen: His hands can't hit what his eyes can't see	112
Chapter Sixteen: Hermitage	123
Chapter Seventeen: Temple of Baal	133
Chapter Eighteen: Running around in circles, loudly	147
Chapter Nineteen: No geography	150
Chapter Twenty: With the side open	152
Chapter Twenty One: The freedom of the world	154



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 percolator, 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-wized, 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 air conditioner 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 Rentoul 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 hippogriffs, 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 Hieronymus 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 Kolo'i's 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.'



Chapter Six:

It was always to you that I made my promises

Returning in dripping darkness to Clare, George was apprehensive about his numb puffed lip, remembering that women enact their first horror at one's being hurt by hurting one more, in general, even if the attack is only clenched and verbal. In the house, the women were relieved the heat had broken. Clare was stare-eyed awake, sat on the lounge like a mermaid thrown on rocks by a breaker, fingered sweat-knots like brine from her hair. Coral, her mother, let George in, and bit her own lower lip when she saw his, in sympathetic mimesis, so Clare's attention was directed at once to the bruises. He sat next to her, and her fingers left her hair and touched his mouth, in fumbling gestures that flooded him with pity for her pity. She asked,



'Who punched you?' in a tiny, polite, wry voice. George answered, 'Andrew Traske.' She suggested: 'Let me guess. It was dark, and he thought you were a woman?' George mimicked her tone: 'No. He was high on ice and deluded that I could put him back in Bathurst. He used a glass, but fortunately not one that was broken.' Her mother brought them tea in old rose china, questioned, 'Did he say where Charlotte is?' So George considered: 'I think he doesn't know. It seems to be either the Orchard Hills Warriors from Hell, his mother and his sister, or someone called Schmidt. Has anyone heard of him?' However, they hadn't, then Clare said, 'Some drug and Telecommunication spook using land for his laundry, I think I do remember: he bought up bits of the Golden Triangle from the Company, had something to do with Pine Gap, but don't they all? He'd never need to use Bikies. He could afford his own battalion.'



'But Andrew might not have been working in his Warrior capacity', said George, 'He made some better contacts when he was in Bathurst, and he seems to have a reputation for lip-sewn discretion, although not so much tonight.'

The tea savaged his mouth with arpeggio continuation, like the linked notes in a toothache, so he knuckled it hard with the front of his hand. Clare watched the pain water in his eyes for a second then placed her lips against his, without opening them, let them travel up his face to his gaze like living moth's wings, their corners raised almost imperceptibly, the stubborn satin flutter of separate secret knowledge within. He gripped his fingers behind her shoulders in a way that seemed to belong to a much younger situation, as if he were still the teenager enthralled by Rosaleen Norton, holding a girl even tighter



than he had held her cigarette. In the kitchen, Clare's mother was on her cell phone to Sophie in Russia, Florence's eager tones irresistible yet. Clare's mother came in with the phone: 'They want us to set up a mirror. ' 'Oh, why the hell not?' asked Clare in languor, leaning back like a chocolate box woman, her face in her raised arm under her elbow, limp fingers tucked against her throat. The damp dusting of silver fox in her armpit smelled as warm but distilled as a cut rose indoors, ghosting sun. The day had been so hot, the rain had fallen thick, sweet, black, like a liqueur, as if now here everything too close to the world's death, *fin de siècle*, he thought: head back, trapped at bay and catching breath. He said, 'If we mirror *Moscow Nights*, I'd really better make sure the Glock still works.' The site not only streamed Idris' interview program, but had the endless complex



discussions Russians like about sensitive data, each
reference to technology intact, each long comparison
of mask and filing systems making *Wikileaks* look tamed.
Clare said, 'They just wanted to make poor little Idris
an example, like Assange. They never take out mirrors,
at least not that I remember.' George irrelevantly recalled
the end of Welles' *Lady from Shanghai*, each reflection
being shot, and exclaimed, with something like manic humour,
'Okay, with any luck we can duck, and the Bikies and Schmidt
and the Company can take each other out over the top of us,
as they actually do tend to, in a crisis. I suppose until they indict
him, Assange has Pamela Anderson.' 'Or they both have a sense
of comedy,' said Clare. Her mother was saving links and instruction
from Sophie, then they said Goodnight to Florence, who showed
them her new Russian Teddy Bear. It was blue with snowy glitter



on its thick eyelashes. Then Clare's mother took the small computer back to the kitchen to watch *Game of Thrones*. Clare was overwhelmed unexpectedly by panic, and gripped him by the arms. She said, 'It's the Bikies who are dangerous. A few of them are madmen, play chess spiked with amphetamine. If they don't like where the knight is, they'll just crash it to the ground.' He said, 'Oh, Clare,' with the same indrawn oxygen of passion that perhaps Assange in London felt for Anderson, but his had lasted decades. The word 'knight' reminded him of Tennyson, and he quoted *Galahad*: "My strength is as the strength of ten, Because my heart is pure." She asked, 'Pure what?', sniffing a bit to recover, but shivered again, to make him hold her. He answered, 'At this stage, just pure dopamine, but that's effective,' and she laughed: 'God, I love you. But the Bikies are going to cream you, boy. We must regroup now and consider.' But he was trying to remember



more of the Tennyson, recited deep into her hair, against
the pulses in her scalp: "The tempest crackles on the leads,
And, ringing, springs from brand and mail; But o'er the dark
a glory spreads, And gilds the driving hail..." Her head
lolloped with exhausted fear, and he went on: "So pass
I hostel, hall, and grange; By bridge and ford, by park
and pale, All-arm'd I ride, whate'er betide, Until I find
the holy Grail." He had been recalling for himself, but at last
ended for her lightly, as if performing a trick. He told her then
about Charlotte's little dog. He said, 'In my head, I promised
you that I would find Charlotte. It was always to you that I made
my promises.' The strange past tense oddly reassured her, as
if for an instant time were behind them.



Chapter Seven:

Schmidt's Lover

In the still-raining morning, Clare insisted I ring Harry Terrence, to find out more about Schmidt, the Bikies and what terrified Andrew Traske. I had also checked the Glock, and there was no reason to think it wouldn't work again. I had considered checking it before she woke up, not to alarm her, but I was at that point where I wasn't sure how dangerous it would be to withhold information that she might need, or I might need her to have. She watched me put it back in the drawer and exclaimed mysteriously: 'Oh, Jesus. All the things I've done to my mother...!'

I said, 'She's just programmed a mirror for Russian hackers.'

She corrected, with a girlish reliance on one of the argument's details:

'They're not all Russians.'

'That doesn't help,' I said.

Assistant Police Commissioner Harry Terrence was eating breakfast in his office, and discussed the likelihood of my death in between mouthfuls of what sounded like fried egg and toasted muffin. His teeth were too old for



bacon and, anyway, his daughter had persuaded him to be vegetarian, 'for his heart' - but really for hers. I said, 'Clare and I don't eat meat, either' to reassure him - in that building where Maccas was a way of life, unless your wife was also a constable, you were fighting for territory in your mortgage, and you'd just done a gourmet cooking course in order to take over her kitchen. He said, 'I like animals, anyway. How's that rat from Thirroul?'

'Johnny Depp. Good. His family are back. They get him to squeak to Florence on the phone.'

'How is Florence?'

"Good. She likes Moscow. Doesn't mind the temperatures. Little girls always seem to love running around in the freezing cold. Clare thinks the Bikies are going to kill me.'

'She's probably right. Are you looking for Charlotte?'

I asked, 'Are you?' - not accusing, but respectful, because - if he wasn't - he already knew she was safe somewhere, or dead.

He gave a dry sigh and conceded, 'Yes. But it's very complicated. Bikies, but then there are other things. Still got the Glock?'

'Yes.'



'Ammo?'

'Yes.'

'Missus okay with that?'

'No. But she's impetuous herself.' Clare, who saw herself as very even-tempered, gave an objecting gasp against my shoulder blade. For some reason, she often positioned herself embracing my back when I was on the phone, but it gave an unsettling feeling.

I asked, 'Who are Schmidt's lovers?'

He didn't answer my question with any questions, so I was on the money. The dry sigh again. Then: 'Of those I know of, the three important ones are Bryony Betts, who's the Matriarch and lives in the Bellevue Hill house he uses most, Edmund Silver, who started off as a toy for Bryony, and transferred to Schmidt himself - runs some of his businesses now, including international - and a really pretty little kid in her early twenties, Quentin Roberts, who's a sort of facilitator for him, and moves around a bit. She's living in Byron Bay at the moment, but visits her mother in Mt Druitt. You know her mother: Silkie Roberts.'



Silkie had been my Probation charge decades ago, and, earlier, one of Heather's favourite pupils. I had visited her in Silverwater when it was still a women's prison, and later tried to help when she was a client back in Probation, I was in charge, and she had inadvertently killed her baby with a poisoned tranquiliser. I had an indelible memory of my first day back in the building, kneeling immobile on the floor as I held her up, and being soaked by her crying.

I told Harry, 'I could certainly visit Silkie.'

He said, 'Alright. Let me know if she tells you anything useful. But Quentin isn't at Byron Bay at the moment. Take the Glock, in case. Not that that will do you much good when they fire-bomb you. Do you still box?'

'No. Do you?'

'Not often. But the Police Boys Club need a couple of people, and it isn't a young man's sport these days. Give it a go?'

I said, 'If I survive Schmidt, the Spooks and the Bikies.'

He said, 'You won't, mate. Listen to your Missus.'

Before we finished the two-muffin-length conversation, I asked him, 'Which of the three main lovers did Andrew Traske work with?'



He chuckled, again dryly: 'That's the point, George, isn't it? He worked with them all.'

I made a point of shutting the phone down before he shut off his, then I turned around quickly, untangling some arms, so that Clare was close to my chest before she could even revise the koala position. But she wanted to talk about Rosaleen Norton.

She asked, 'Do you think you were interested in me in the same way you were interested in her, because I was evil?'

'Roie wasn't evil. And no, when I met her I was about seventeen, and interested in her because I'd heard she fucked. The black magic brouhaha was a bonus but I never found out much about it, although I think I used it in a couple of psychology essays later. Now I wish I had paid it more attention, because she was sincere and passionate about it, and painted it so well. She must have seen some integrity in me, though, because she was kind to me and let me light her cigarettes in my mouth. She was very pretty, as you say, but in a black-and-white 30s actress way, like Ida Lupino. I only remembered it all properly again because of the Traske's prints.'

Clare asked, perceptively: 'Do you remember it in black and white?'



I was monologuing with my hands open, palms upward, in her lap. I thought about that: 'Yes, but her paintings in my memory are in colour. And I'd almost forgotten it by the time I met you.' I wondered if 'met' was quite the right word, as Clare had been sitting quietly opposite me in a prison office at the time, and not paying me perfect attention. I went on: 'I was in my *pater familias* phase at the time, so you were a threat to pretty well everything, until you proved you weren't.'

She said, 'It was a good phase, and a good family to be *pater* to, although Heather shouldn't have let you drink like that out in the nasturtiums. You've said Norton wasn't evil. You didn't say I wasn't, though?'

'That was *ipso facto*!' Why did her inquisitions make my diction so legal? I reassured once more: 'I never really thought you were evil, despite anything I tried on at the beginning. But If anything, I was probably even more prejudiced against you, because I was embarrassed subconsciously at what I thought was my silliness as a boy.'

She asked, 'But you don't think of it as silliness now?'

I said, 'Oh, it was silly alright. But I'm not embarrassed by silliness anymore.'



She saw that I had finished any difficult explication, and let her fingers drift over my hands, not closing. She asked, 'Were you in love with Silkie Roberts?'

That was easy: 'Only when I was with her, and then only because she could sense it and it helped. I don't know which of us would have been more astonished if I'd done anything about it, her or me. Do you want to go with me when I visit her?'

She thought about it: 'I don't know if she'd confide more if I was there - it's hard to tell. I'm not jealous - or I suppose I am, but it's sexy. She's probably still got all that heavy blond hair: dye doesn't matter: hair that blonde looks died, anyway, from the start, but it's lovely. She wouldn't be interested in me if I wasn't with you. I think I'm too turned on by the idea of you questioning her, like in a movie. I'd better go as a reality check, George, really.'

I was still trying to work that out in the car.

Silkie discerned at once that Clare was pregnant, and so became animated and more enthusiastic. She asked, 'Is it the first?' And Clare nodded and smiled with a mixture of wistfulness and anxiety. They were much the same age, but Silkie had two grown-up children, conceived after the little one who died. Their pictures were everywhere in the house: Rory, a tall young baker,



with his awards and glistening pastries, and Quentin, who was remarkably photogenic, and had been photographed in many locations, especially South East Asia, and the North Coast beaches. Expensive hats and sunglasses. She had her mother's lustrous sunny hair, and hopeful smile. Rory had his arm around a wryly shy girlfriend, but Quentin was always photographed alone.

Clare said, 'His fiancée looks nice.' Reverting to the diction of their provenance, gender and era, when 'nice' was the best thing you could be.

'Yeah, she's a darling', said Silkie, who was still a darling herself, with something of the quality of a very pretty puppy. She had been nicknamed Silkie because her family bred dogs, and because of her Disney tresses. Clare saw me looking at her, caught my eye and smiled with tolerant mischief: *there, you were more in love with her than you thought you were.* But Silkie was clearly focused on Clare, so Clare's presence was what mattered.

Clare had brought the conversation around to whether Quentin, too, was engaged to someone nice. Silkie had shown no surprise that we were visiting, but she knew Ruth, and Ruth had probably told her we were looking around in general for Charlotte. It wasn't likely that the possible connection between



Quentin and Charlotte would occur to her. And, anyway, she regarded me as an old friend by now.

She said, 'She's coming today, if you'd like to meet her. I don't think she's interested in anyone right away, but she's got a really good job. She's got a really nice house at Byron. She's working for a European firm, and they get her to travel a lot.' Travelling was still somehow talismatic, at once a substitute for growth of character, for professional experience, and for aquired but analysed knowledge - and it also served as an antiseptic for any local infections. Silkie clearly regarded Quentin as much more capable than she.

She added, 'The taxi should be here soon.'

I put my gilded little coffee cup to one side, and realised that the taxi had indeed arrived. For a second in the doorway, against the grey sun, was the figure of a young fair woman with her head raised like a model, and her violet satin coat falling back from a slim green dress, and then there was another figure beside her. For a second, one thought: companion, but then one realised she wasn't aware of him.

Simultaneously, Clare ran across to the door, pulled Quentin into the house, and hurried her into a bedroom, dragging Silkie in there, too, by the arm, and



I reached down and drew out the Glock, flicking off the safety catch. I levelled it straight at the figure in the doorway. He was a neat little man in a too-neat suit, also armed. Not a Glock 22 like mine - something much heavier, maybe a 27. It looked like one, but I was deliberately over-focused. At any rate, it was meant partly for psychological effect, and would have been harder than a 22 for him to handle. Bikie, he wasn't, unless they had hired him.

His purpose seemed to be to take Quentin with him, not kill her. At that range, the thing he was holding would have pulped any wooden door in the world, and everything behind it. He wasn't expecting me or the more streamlined Glock, and I watched him think. There were too many people, this was outside his instructions. Wherever she was to be taken, Quentin was supposed to arrive there discreetly.

I said, surprising him with any sort of human speech: 'You've already miscalculated. You were supposed to be five seconds earlier to intercept her, so that her mother didn't see you. She'll have phoned Schmidt by now.'

He must have known Schmidt's effectiveness was almost instantaneous, and the sound of a new car arriving decided him. He was gone as minimally as he had appeared. I made sure he *was* gone and then retrieved the women.



Clare was comforting Silkie, and Quentin was talking in a breathy shocked staccato to Schmidt on her cell phone, until she meandered to the front door, where the corporeal Schmidt was standing with his cell phone, answering her.

I was surprised he had come in person, even though he was accompanied by three quiet assistants who had the same restless, peculiar neck-angles as FBI bodyguards. There didn't seem any need to whisk Quentin away soon, so we all sat in the loungeroom, and Silkie found more coffee cups, apologising that they didn't all match. She was still clutching Clare's hand, so Clare accompanied her politely as she poured out the coffee and found more thick chocolate biscuits.

Schmidt sat opposite me and looked at the lowered and re-safety-catched Glock with genuine interest. He asked 'From the Police?'

I said: 'For another occasion. But Clare was worried about Bikies.'

He nodded, 'They do worry, the women.' His accent, I thought was quicker and lighter than German. Austrian perhaps? He was a larger man than I had expected: more relaxed, with looser clothes and finer eyes.



He and Quentin showed no affection in the presence of her mother. Silkie released Clare and began hugging Quentin, whose face thinned unexpectedly into tears.

I remembered the younger Silkie crying, and saw her again now in this. Schmidt clearly wanted to pat Quentin, but kept his discretion. So we all sat courteously for a time, until the crying stopped, Schmidt stood up and the men and Quentin followed him, after she'd promised her mother she'd be back soon - this week. He looked at me as they left, with a formal, acknowledging expression. It wasn't fulsome gratitude, but it might help in some or other approaching crisis, if once again my future depended on one man's utter corruption.

When they were gone, I phoned Harry Terrence and asked that a policewoman stay with Silkie. We left when a solemn pair of them arrived.

In the car, Clare yawned, but looked unsettled by yawning: 'I feel as if I suddenly want to go straight to sleep.'

'Well, then you must,' I said. 'We'll lie down at your mother's. Then we can wake up and work out exactly what just happened.'

She brightened: 'Do you think we can?' she asked.



Chapter Eight:

The followers of Pan

They were lying on the bed, discussing bottoms. Clare's had already begun to raise and harden a little with her pregnancy, and she would stand at times in front of the mirror, flexing the muscles up behind her thighs, at a slight angle like a warrior with a spear, who shows off sardonically for a camera, as if the camera were George. Now on the bed, she raised her hips an inch or so, to tighten them again, in that kaftan as blue-transparent as a shadow, with her hand under her straining, strengthening spine. He didn't dare caress her in case the whole structure suddenly capsized. She said, 'Most men your age don't have real bottoms. It's good you still have yours, you know.' He thought about it: 'It may be because I played Highschool cricket. I was the best fast bowler. You need a really strong arse for that. It's where you pitch from.' He'd said 'arse', becoming a schoolboy again, although he knew she thought 'bottom'



was sexier in its curving letters, breaths: its baby naughtiness. Her back
fell on her hand, as she lost concentration, asked him: 'Is it Quentin,
do you think, who's dobbing on Schmidt? If it is, she's a dead woman. God,
I hope she's not.' 'That might have been the reason for the gunman,' George's
dry sigh reminded him of Harry - was it an old man thing? - 'He might
have been sent by Schmidt to take her for interrogation, but we fucked it up.
Did you think Schmidt was sexy?' She sat crosslegged, like a boy buddha, thought
pleasantly of George's bottom - definitely *en pomme* - and wondered if
Schmidt had had one. She said, 'Not really. The older lead in something:
Curt Jurgens in *And God Created Woman*. He knows he needs his money
to keep her on the leash and that the leash has to be long. I don't know
if power is always sexy, anyway. Trump isn't sexy. Maybe it's an abdication
by one's power source that's sexy. One panics and screaming panic seems
a sexy feeling sometimes.' George said, 'Yes - it's Dionysian: women
in a frenzy like the followers of Pan. I was thinking of that when I looked



at the Nortons. You've reminded me of a maenad lately. You throw all your head back, one way or another.' The phone rang on the side of George that wasn't hers. She expected him to answer, but he looked at her, bit his lower lip not to laugh, and their gazes set in quickened innocence. She flopped over his lap, picked up the receiver. He thought: It's like reassurance: the womb on his thigh with the baby in it, warm and solid even though it wouldn't kick for months. She wriggled under his hand, exaggerating each contrast to her calm tone on the phone: 'It's Ruth. I left a message for her about Bryony Betts. She was in Ruth's Shelter once and then when she began living with Schmidt, she came back and gave them money. She and Ruth still talk together often.' Ruth had a message from Tyffanie to George: there was something happening in a cave that might, Andy thought, have something to do with Charlotte, but it might also be going to involve a double rip-off about ice. Andy didn't know if he should go. George asked, 'Which cave?', expecting something at Jenolan. Clare



repeated his question and then Ruth's answer: 'The self-guiding one at Yarrangobilly, near the Snowies. Not Andy's. It's on tomorrow in the afternoon.' Clare added, 'We could go and check it out. I do like the pool there.' George asked, 'A double rip-off, a kidnapped baby, and you're going for a swim?' Her hips rose under his fingers. She sighed defensively: 'Only in the morning. We'll be dry by midday.'

Ruth gave more information about Bryony. She was from the North Shore originally, and bolted from the beatings, but had seemed at last happy at Bellevue Hill with Schmidt, although recently she'd been suffering anxiety attacks, and Schmidt was becoming tetchy at all those after-midnight wakings. He was not, George thought, a reassuring man.

Clare asked, 'Why is she anxious?' Ruth said, 'She says because he almost got killed in Europe, until they changed their minds. But women get those anxious spells when there are other women - and in his case, there are also other men. I can't do anything tomorrow. I'm at Cobham.'



My little boy was crying on the phone.' They sent their love to many,
and she was done. George said, 'At least Jimmy can still cry. There's hope
for that one.' Coming, Clare shuddered in his tight fist round her arm.



Chapter Nine:

The Self-Guiding Cave

Because we had slept in the afternoon, we woke in the early hours of the morning, even before the light had turned blue topaz in the window. I rang my drinking buddy in Langley and Idris in Moscow with the same question: who had tried to kill Schmidt in Europe, and why did they stop? Idris' sources seemed to be quicker than the M.I.'s, but they both came up with the same simple answer: Schmidt had been siphoning off funds from the Company's remaining narcotics assets in the Golden Triangle, but so was someone else, and he had promised to find them. Whether this was his own domestic traitor, no one seemed sure. But it was in Schmidt's interests that this be the case, because of the ease of eliminating that person. It was probably to his credit that he *was* making an effort to identify the specific person, rather than dispatch his entire household, like a suspicious Chinese Emperor.

Clare asked, 'Do you think he could do that - even if he does love them?' I understood that we would be discussing the nature of love, its lethal



potential, and whether people like Schmidt were, anyway, capable of love, all through the five hour morning drive to Yarrangobilly, and - since it would be with Clare - I actually found the prospect of that conversation quite enticing. It helped me wake up.

Before I finished interrogating Langley, I asked, over-simply: 'What is it with you guys and Trump? If you didn't want him, why's he there?'

He laughed one of those deep, rich American chuckles: 'Well, Hillary's Russian uranium didn't help. It's that Clinton wave-a-spear-and-cut-a-deal thing. Trump just waves the spear, and we can throw it. Boom. But you don't arm-wrestle Russians. You do the Haka. And then Hill's health didn't look good, and she can't work Bill's Windows, and the Donald's still a triumph of chemical engineering. But 'boom' was just about it, really. He's astonished, looking for signals, and his feet can't touch the floor. He'll be around for a while, even if we cut one of our own heads off occasionally. We've got a lot of heads, George. And most of them don't like each other.'

In the car, heading for the Monaro, Clare asked, 'Was any of that true?'

I said, 'It's true to him. Everything in Langley is sort of middle level.'



She exclaimed, 'Middle Earth!' but started to relax a little. It was Sophie's car - a solid Mitsubishi - and drove very smoothly and heavily, as if it had learned to compensate for an impatient French driver.

The sight of more and more cows signified a different pace and fresher, more fertilised air. Clare's head pressed back against the high seat and she sighed in taut gasps, expelling the suburban pressure. The dawn mists gleamed on the paddocks in black and white queues like disincarnate friesians. She didn't sleep, but her head lolled sideways sometimes and she continued the conversation at ten minute intervals, as if there had been no breaks. I wasn't in the mood for any more news. I listened to the Western Suburbs Radio long enough to ascertain that Lost Charlotte was apparently mislaid forever, and then played an Mp3 of Toscanini conducting the Internationale. Clare and I had made love to the Internationale, successfully, once - but not this version. This was defiant and orchestral.

Clare said, 'It sounds like the same era as Paul Robeson, before they got him.'

I said, 'They didn't get him. He was mad with depression and thought - probably rightly - that they'd bugged up his car brakes - but he stayed alive and the recordings he made with a single piano in his lounge room are in the



purest base baritone range of Chaliapin. He was in love with the romance of the Russians, and that's what he finally lived.'

She said, after a while, 'I think the way his reputation is being revived now is probably meant as a warning.'

I was cheerful as the dawnlight grew warmer on my skin. I asked, 'Do you feel warned?'

She giggled: "No. Do you?"

I seized her hand impetuously, chaffing the blood back, until she replaced my fingers disapprovingly on the wheel as a supermarket truck began to overtake us. The truck receded safely, but I suddenly empathised with Robeson: what the fuck if the brakes had failed?

I drove the rest of the way in subdued concentration. It was only sitting at a laminex tabletop of foggy cocoa in a cafe near Yass that we discussed whether men like Schmidt could love. We concluded that his world was crowded with sales, failed sums and huddled servants. Even if he vaguely missed that emotion, he would not have had the conceptual expanse for it.

As I drove carefully down the bush path to the Yarrangobilly Caves, the strange aura of the place seeped up towards us. A bowerbird trailed itself



elaborately into an undergrowth that still had bushfire blackness. One sensed a sullen stillness, observation.

The area had once been a prison and prisoners had built the thermal pool. It was fed placidly by an ancient spring, whose water was still but never cold. Clare found her two piece white swimsuit and my khaki shorts on the back seat, and we changed in the toilet block. This still had a Snowy Mountains sharp metallic chill.

In the tepid water, Clare stood on tiptoe or rubbed her feet along the rough weed growth on the bottom for a while, until she launched off quickly, turned herself over and floated with her face to the mountain sky. I stood beside her, watching the silent guest house and the expanse to the caves. She seemed to lapse into the peculiar suspended animation that was more common since her pregnancy, but also reminded me of the time she was a child in prison.

We dried each other extravagantly with bath towels at the edge of the water. It was midday. Back in the toilet block - that was not perceptibly warmer - we put on slacks, hoodies and walking boots suitable to a tourist- level cave. The self-guiding cave was called South Glory. North Glory was in habitual darkness, unless rented by a pack of visitors.



Two cars arrived, a Toyota and a Mercedes. Some Chinese tourists came up from the cave and walked quickly to the guesthouse. Two women got out of the Toyota. The older carried a big cotton pouch on her side, with dry picnic bread sticking out the top. Clare and I pretended to be walking towards the exit road. Three Bikies arrived in full road-regalia, one a Greybeard. Four men in expensive casual clothes got out of the Mercedes. They had mountain jackets with long heavy pockets. All the new arrivals climbed to the Self-Guiding Cave and entered.

Clare and I doubled back and followed them discreetly. We paused and hid at the entrance, which was under two gaping natural holes in the roof rock. All nine people were far inside the cave. Clare and I moved further in behind a corner obscured by stalagmites and stones, and looked sideways at steep metal flights of steps. Fortunately all the participants had a druggy, adrenalin-fueled close focus, with a blessed lack of lateral perception.

Clare and I settled together, crouched low in the sheltering formations. The setting had a cool, feminine reassurance about it: dusky pink and fawn protuberances and smoothnesses, and the smell of secret, transforming water.



Greybeard offered a bulky packet to the men in casual clothes. They immediately pulled out some efficient, military semi-automatics. The Bikies almost reached for lesser guns, backed down. They clearly hadn't expected the number or arms. The men from the Mercedes shrugged when asked for the money. They ripped open the packet and smelled it: baby powder and crushed pebbles.

They pistol-whipped the Greybeard professionally, but left him conscious. The older woman had been swaying halfway up the stairs, and suddenly climbed them. She opened the side pouch and showed Greybeard a small child, who was drugged but whimpering. Clare mouthed the same whimpering noise, imperceptibly, in my side. Then we slid around the stalagmite and sideways again, hidden from the stairs and the entrance.

The women left, then the men from the Mercedes and the two young Bikies, carrying the Greybeard carefully. Clare and I waited, then some real tourists - a joyous wedding party - arrived and we left through the crowd. The celebrant began to climb the stairs and slipped for a second on the blood, seeming puzzled.

Outside there were more cars, but no bikes, Toyotas or Mercedes. The Chinese were in the thermal pool, looking polite and splashing.



Clare said, 'So Schmidt's people have warned Andy about the rip-off but used the occasion to confirm Charlotte is alive. Andy hasn't warned the Bikies but wants you there to confirm things about Charlotte.' She added, 'And did you know that the older woman was Bryony?'



Chapter Ten:

The Little Australian Raven

In the car, Clare chatted with Idris. Eager to her on the tiny screen,

he described his latest project: designing currency in bitcoin

for the Palestinians so the Israelis wouldn't control it, online.

'It will be their whole currency soon,' she told George after. He said:

'The Russians may not like that' cautiously and drove slower:

there was a sparkling Yass truck crash, and they chose to return home

by the main Range, see the Charlotte Pass wildflowers in summer's

fragile brightnesses, the sun haze hovering just above the waters

of the newborn Snowy River. They walked down to it, the mountain

clouds reflected from their faces like the stream, seeming to each other

as fever-eyed and loud-breathed as children. Dappled, Clare sat

by the quick thin Snowy, against George's legs, reading her car book:



Louise Brooks' *Lulu in Hollywood*. George's collection of pre-Hays Code movies had turned her on to such things, and the biography of Tynan where the experienced Brooks was venerable mentor: 'Except,' said Clare, 'She seemed to have convinced him that an excited woman can ejaculate clear across the room.' 'Well, maybe she could,' said George, feeling *laissez faire*, and pretending to read the paper.

They had rung Harry Terrence on the phone which George had been given by his friend in Langley. It worked in the high Snowies, as if its real tower was somewhere in a stationary orbit. Harry had not seemed surprised at anything in the South Glory Cave, but George had the addendum:

'He got to be Deputy Commissioner by sounding unsurprised, however.'

She said, but fretful: 'At least Charlotte is alive. I'm glad Harry told us he'd let Ruth and the family know. But they shouldn't get their hopes up.

I think Bryony would be careful, though.' 'Though those breadsticks on top did look a little cavalier,' said George. She read aloud: "'The great art



of film does not consist of descriptive movement of face and body but in the movements of thought and soul transmitted in a kind of intense isolation." That's right, I think. It's thought-pauses and mute passions I remember most from movies. Isolation gives everything significance, like here.' She gestured around at the air, which carried in its silence mountain ranges. But her gesture had all the long anxiety from Charlotte, and a pair of birds known here as 'The Little Australian Raven' left the snow gums, flying up to Kosciuszko's wind-grey tufts. She thought: *they've been alive only a season, but they seem so accustomed already to each other, although not quite coordinated*, said, 'They stay here in the winter longer than you'd expect. At least we haven't seen any wild horses full of bullets this time. If I'd remembered we might, I don't believe I would have suggested this. My memory must have been in trauma.'

He said, 'I thought we'd have the luck of trauma: like sleepwalkers not



falling off roofs. Although, of course, they can.' She interrupted him before he recalled details, looking up with her head on his arm, her eyes glinting the blue of the flying ravens. He recollected himself in order not to recollect, reassured: 'But they don't fall often,' his own tone half following, half certain. When they drove down, the heavy moon sleep-walked smoothly on Lake Jindabyne.



Chapter Eleven :

Another Lover

It was early autumn. Clare was in her second trimester, with a bottom as firm and high as a nude on a Nubian spoon (with one dimple), and a face even more like a children's book sprite, Jimmy was on the roof at Cobham, and Edmund Silver was sitting next to me in the local pub, The Roundabout, looking and sounding like a desolate girl as he pined for the attentions of Schmidt. Charlotte was still Lost, and every one was waiting - including Prisoners of Conscience, which was waiting for our second report on detention in the area, as we were at that stage more interested in retrieving Charlotte and relocating Jimmy from the roof.

Harry Terrence had phoned me that Edmund Silver was in Mt Druitt for a vintage car show, so I had left Clare with Ruth at Ruth's, discussing Jimmy-strategies, and sauntered over to Silver in the pub's glamorised parking lot, as he stroked a violet-hued 1967 Ford Fairlane as if it were a Siamese cat. It might have arched its sultry bonnet and rubbed against his



hand. I stood next to him and asked directly but not aggressively, 'What is it with crims and vintage cars?'

He said softly, 'I only like the purple ones.' It was a flirty answer. He seemed to have graduated to a high level in criminal efficiency and viciousness without losing his toy-boy mannerisms. He was creating a courtesan's discourse, and I decided to treat him like a woman.

I said, 'They remind you of chocolate,' and he gave a sweetly inadvertent smile.

He said, 'You're right, Mr. Jeffreys' - I remembered him being a charge's baby brother - 'Mr. Schmidt has one of these. He has a lot of cars. We used to go to car shows together. I went to them with Bryony, too, but she only has a Toyota.'

I said, 'I know. I saw it at Yarrangobilly.'

He nodded neatly and politely: he obviously knew of that event.

I asked, 'Were you there?', knowing he wasn't.

'No. I'm not allowed to go to anything with Bryony anymore.'

'Who doesn't Schmidt trust?' I conveyed sympathy and surprise that his master might not trust him.



'Both of us, I think. It's not fair, you know, because I've always loved him.'

'I can see that,' I reassured him. Whatever outrageous perfidies he might have performed, there was no doubt about his passion. Tears were about to splotch on the Fairlane. I held his arm from under his elbow, as if he were infirm: 'I'll buy you a drink, Edmund Silver.'

The smile again. He was craving the discourse. Schmidt must have been adept at flirting - but, of course, he would have been, and with Quentin. But I couldn't imagine Schmidt flirting with Bryony. She was The Wife. She got the impatience, and the hard jobs, like looking after Charlotte. And still he didn't trust her, didn't trust her... one of these people was clearly going to die.

Inside the pub, Silver sat opposite me at a just-wiped glass table, not next to me at the bar. Mates, we weren't. I wondered what he would drink. Designer beer? A Snowball? Gin? I thought of Louise Brooks' description of her proclivity for lying in bed all day drinking gin. Despite its Hogarthian disrepute, it was a drink Clare and I had always found weak and cloying.

He asked for gin and tonic. I went to the bar and brought it back for him, with my own black Guinness. They had poured the stout correctly -



sideways and slowly, so its head was right. He looked at my glass and said, 'So you are dark and bitter?'

I said, 'Undoubtedly. And you are icy and transparent?' I gave up on including the wedge of lemon in the metaphor.

The smile. He said, 'Transparent, anyway. He ought to trust me.'

I asked, 'Doesn't he send you to Dubai anymore?'

He said, 'He doesn't send Quentin, either. He said he was going to send Andrew to get some American guns from the Emirates, but Andrew just hasn't got that sort of experience. He's still a bloody Bikie. '

I nodded, 'He's a bouncer. But Schmidt might bribe him with Dubai, if the Charlotte thing doesn't work? It doesn't mean Schmidt doesn't still love you.'

He shrugged: 'The man can't love. I never thought he could. When someone can't love, you use them. Quentin and Bryony use him, too.'

I said, 'I don't think Bryony is used to being loved by anyone. Quentin is - her mother and her brother. That will help her. Is Charlotte still okay?'

'How would I know?' He tensed and his depressed eyes clouded like the gin. But I sensed the topic itself was perilous, not that there was necessarily any new, bad secret about Lost Charlotte.



I redirected the conversation to the less personal: 'Do you know of any reason to do with Andrew that Jimmy is up on the roof at Cobham? Or did the Solitary finally just rip him up, and he thought God could hear him better up there, when he couldn't hear God laughing at his jokes in the cell anymore? He won't say why he's up there. And they're leaving him at the moment, because they know he'll jump if they don't.'

'Andrew beat on all those black kids. Jimmy knows more, so he got kicked more. He used to watch Andrew. He might have seen something about whatever Andrew knows that Schmidt wants to know. Andrew may have warned him. He doesn't know anything about me, though. It wasn't about me.' So *all* roads to Edmund Silver were personal.

He asked, 'Would you like a drink yourself, before I go?'

I shook my head, but in a worldly, non-judging way. As he left, he answered my first question: 'Of course, crims like vintage cars because the drug deals are at the expos, and you can travel around on the roads a bit. But then you get hooked on the fucking cars.' From the pub window next to me, I saw him dismissively but wistfully caress the basking Ford Fairlane again as he went past it.



When I returned to Ruth's, the atmosphere was, as always, somewhat Appalachian. There were rocking chairs, patchwork throws, glass bead lamps and some Carter sister with a bass fiddle on the replica vinyl player. It was saddening and reassuring in a pleasant equal mixture.

Clare's mother was there and Clare's little tired feet were up on the couch. There was a thin new azure vein down one of her calves, but it just showed how clear the flesh was. I recalled once again that phrase of Meredith's about his heroine as 'a dainty rogue in porcelain.' Her feet were wide apart and she already looked impatient, with her arms behind her head.

I said, 'Jimmy's probably up there because Andrew threatened him. He may have guessed who Schmidt's traitor is. Maybe he was planning to do something about it, try to get Charlotte back. He's always had guts, that boy. Who would Andrew use to get at him?'

Ruth said, 'Not his cousin. There are plenty of Bikies in there. Warriors from Hell. Could Ms. Kent do something? Or Mr. Antonelli? My little boy really needs protection.'

Clare said, 'He'll be in Solitary forever, once they drag him off the roof.' She swung her legs to the ground and pressed her toes into the prickly nylon carpet: 'And that's where they'll find him hanging.'



For some reason, her sentence reminded me of something she had said to me decades ago: *'I've looked in your eyes and seen myself hanging.'* She looked up and we stared at each other fixedly for a moment, as if we weren't where we were.

Then she asked her mother: 'Can you ask Elinor and Philip over to our place tonight? They'd probaby like to visit somewhere as a couple?'

Ruth added, 'Harry Terrence will be here for the Police Boy's Club. You could ask him as well. I'll come over, and bring Tyffanie.'

Coral asked, 'What will I cook for them all?' and Clare and I mouthed at her soundlessly and simultaneously: 'Just order pizza.'

Back at Coral's, we turned on the TV News and saw the distant figure of Jimmy prowling up and down on the Cobham roof. Clare said, making the obvious comparison with a restless zoo animal, 'It's not the safest place to do the lateral walk, is it?'

Her mother was determined that there would be cooked food involved somehow that night, so Clare and I helped her in the kitchen. Clare and I had a culinary method that we called 'Gnostic Cooking.' That is, no cookbooks, measurements or recipes were involved and the whole process depended on what things felt like when in the hands, subject to the goodwill and



intimations of the Good Spirit of the Universe, and a practised nose for the smell of burning. Saint Augustine would have approved, Antonelli had said, watching us cook once: it was all true to 'Love God and Do What You Will.' We concocted a soup pot of vegetable dip with garlic, and Coral calmed down cutting up bread.

Antonelli and Elinor came in compulsively holding hands, and stayed that way, so the pizza was a good idea. Harry Terrence arrived, dressed in the unusually well-tailored pigeon-grey suit and power-dressing scarlet tie he'd chosen to wear to face the Police Boy's Club, and glanced at the lovers in mild disgust as if life dealt one irritating tiny blow after another, but he could still manage most of it. Ruth and Tyffanie were holding hands, too. Then Tyff sat on the floor at her grandmother's feet, and Ruth kept her hand on her hair. The long waiting for Charlotte had produced a chronic panic in Tyffanie, and it was plain that she was suppressing a perpetual urge to hit out at us indiscriminately and then run for the horizon.

And a few miles away, spotlit on the roof of Cobham, Jimmy was still doing the lateral walk.



Chapter Twelve:

Jimmy on the Roof

Harry said, 'Don't worry' - not something George was always reassured to hear from Harry, but in this case it sounded promising: 'If roof boy has anything useful on Schmidt's lovers, I'll let the Prosecutors know he's a potential co-operating informer. None of Smith's lovers are Bikies, as far as I'm aware.' He looked reassuringly at Tyffanie and Ruth, addressing that aspect of their terror. Elinor said, 'If that gets him out, I'll be his Officer myself and Ruth can watch over him at her place. Philip can make him a poster child for rehabilitations, simplify the whole thing: Jimmy was chased onto the roof by Bikies - ingrained racial fear.'

'What's simple about that?', asked George, but she had a forty year mastery of ignoring his interjections, and Elinor eyes still regal-green.

By-passing Bikies as such



to concentrate on Andrew, Tyffanie stopped her cornered tremor and suggested, 'If you want to call Andy off Jimmy, don't forget the Lithgow Coven. His mother and his sister have a lot more goods on him than I do. They won't talk to me, but, since I asked them if they had Charlotte. Clare and Mr. Jeffreys could visit them up there. Ring first. Brit works late nights and Andy's mother still does a lot of hexes.' Clare phoned them at once and they said they'd be home in the afternoon next day. Clare asked them, 'As we're there, anyway, do a luck charm for my baby?' No one else coos as loudly as a witch does, thought George. After pizza, and Jimmy's rescue strategy decided, Antonelli and Elinor left to once again find each other, and Harry said hello to Idris, who'd rung on Clare's mother's phone and was therefore mirrored strangely, but at least not encrypted. George warned Idris that the Russians might not be as keen as he was on providing cyber



liquidity for the Palestinians, since there seemed to be odd nexus between Trump, the Israelis and the Russians, but Idris said, 'I know all that, it's fine.' They all said goodnight to Florence, and admired again the glittery blue bear. Over coffee, Harry puzzled: 'He said that he was solving quantum unencryption by using industrial diamonds - something about making holes in them, he thought?' Clare said, 'Yes, that's right. They have to whittle down the diamonds and then blast them with electrons, to make more holes for the silicon ions. They cook them until the silicon bonds in the cavity, and they can hold contradictory information, which isn't changed by the observer. But they haven't got it right yet. They can't get the flaws in the right place to concentrate the light. But the important thing is that they don't lose the contradictions.' 'It's really more and more like poetry,' said George. Clare's mother nodded. Harry seemed



satisfied with the explanation, and George walked him to his car, discussing many people and connections. Clare became pregnantly giddy and remarked, 'I need to sit in the fresh night air', went out on the back steps with the thin Egyptian dog and adoring plump Greek cats for a time. The night was colder, breathable. She hunched on the step with her hands on her stomach, as if the baby needed to be lifted. Sometimes now she could feel it kick, or rather flutter like a moth. As if it were fibres of white moon, her hair was touched by real moths, they a little longer viable in the autumn's contradictions. She thought of Jimmy on the roof two miles away, felt suddenly as if she had to sleep, her face hard against her knee. And so then she saw what he could see: the wind rushing the stars across the black horizon, lights like innocent streetlamps scattered at his feet, but watchfully, whispering, as the searchlights shouted on him, like angry



eyes blinding him, dragging his throat to the ground, but
he threw his shoulder back, resisted. Walked up and down,
up and down, from corner to corner with a trudging rhythm
that slowed them up and made them wait for him. It was
the pace of a soldier gone shuffling crazy. If they climbed,
he'd jump to the light's throttling arms, like
a shot dog or a lover, solving any, every thing.



Chapter Thirteen:

Don't Forget the Lithgow Coven

Lithgow appeared flatter even than usual in the weighty early winter air. The town seemed petrified in its mining history, as if Ben Chifley's neglected wife might still be warming herself at a teapot behind some constituent's well-washed, opaque little window.

Clare said, 'No wonder he made a speech about "the light on the hill" - day to day, a hill would be as conceptual here as it was at his home in Bathurst.'

The backgrounding mountains seemed as inaccessible and uninhabitable as sombre stage sets, and the breeze still had a ghost of coal in it, reassuring as a hearth and frightening as a sealed mine shaft.

I said, 'But Bathurst has Mount Panorama,' thinking of car races and Bikies, and the snow like sifted icing sugar on rockfaces.

Andrew Traske's mother and sister lived in a pristine, high-ceilinged fibro cottage in a sidestreet dotted by English trees and bushes. Their lounge room was a cross between Ruth's and Tyffanie's: crystal rainbow lamps, pet-dented patchwork throws with ample fringes, reproachful/defiant guitar music,



nacreous orange carnival glass sweet bowls, blackened candles, two pathetic small animal skulls, dominant Rosaleen Norton prints, and many bright, knotted strings entwined around the polished furniture and lofty white skirting boards.

Mrs. Traske gave us chocolate biscuits and Decaf in the same type of old flower china as Clare's mother used. These, however, were marigolds and foxgloves, not roses. I remembered my mother reading me Alison Uttley's English countryside stories, and realised how much I missed my mother. The daughter - Andrew's sister - Brit had been napping in her bedroom, and went straight past us to the kitchen. She came back chewing a stick of celery loudly. I had met her when she was a charming, bossy child. She didn't look or act much different now.

She said, 'I'm bushed. There was a whole truck convoy this morning. They always ask for me.'

Clare, of course, asked 'Why?'

It wasn't a problem: 'They feel safe with me. I know what I'm doing. And I like them.'

'They must like you, too,' said Clare, with her winsome warm courtesy. I knew she was going to discuss purchasing anti-miscarriage spells before we



got around to Andrew and Jimmy. That was probably strategic, but I was feeling somewhat twitchy. Jimmy was still on the roof, but at least now he was squatting sometimes and had accepted a slice of bread and bottled water from the end of a tree pruner.

I looked at one of the Nortons, in which a smaller marvelously nude Roie was trustingly embracing a larger, very serious panther, surrounded by sympathetic demon spirits with experienced leers.

I said, 'My God, it *is* all about protection, isn't it?'

Everyone seemed to know what I meant, and so murmured agreement. We drank more Decaf, Clare paid them, then Mrs. Traske nodded to Brit, who fetched some magic paraphernalia from a dresser drawer, and a green apple from the kitchen. Who-did-what seemed to be important in the ritual. Mrs. Traske was clearly supervisor, and Brit appeared to enjoy the novelty of obedience.

They drew the curtains and lit candles. They chanted softly to the Lady, and helped Clare knot a piece of green twine. Before they placed it in her pocket, Clare clasped the knot with a fearful concentration. She was willing: *Survive*. So was I.



Clare lay on the couch, lifting her white dress. Mrs. Traske pointed to Brit, who sliced the apple in half with a carved knife and rubbed half on Clare's bare stomach. Then Brit replaced the skirt delicately and reverentially - the truckies had good judgment, I thought - and Clare sat up. She knelt spontaneously at Mrs. Traske's feet, and Mrs. Traske touched her head with both hands and gave her the other half of the apple in a freezer bag, resuming normal conversational tone:

'You can plant it in your mother's garden. It doesn't matter if it doesn't grow, but if it does, the child will be even happier.'

When we were all seated again with more Decaf, Brit resumed authority, and turned on the TV satellite news, from which we confirmed that Jimmy was still aloft at Cobham.

I asked, 'Can you call off your brother and his mates?'

Mrs. Traske said, 'Andy is just afraid of Mr. Schmidt. Andy is trying to get us Charlotte back. Jimmy doesn't know as much as Jimmy thinks he does.'

I said, 'So Jimmy would be safer with his grandmother. Ruth knows how to keep the lid on. But we have to get him down. This is all drawing Schmidt's attention back to Andrew in the wrong way. Will Andrew do what you ask?'



Brit considered: 'Maybe. He knows Mum does excellent hexes. They're the only thing that ever works with Andy.'

She picked up her cell phone and rang Jenolan Caves. Andrew was still working for their Security. She took the phone into her bedroom. When she came back, she sighed, as if this was something, but there were still other things, still difficulties: 'He's calling off the dogs for a while. He said you should go to Cobham.'

In the car, as I drove back over the Blue Mountains, Clare fingered the string and the apple in her pocket. I said, 'It's alright, Jenny Appleseed. You just have to explain to your mother that she's starting an orchard.'

She gave a micro-smile, not wanting to alert the Furies to the baby. She asked, 'Well, Mum did alright with the olives, didn't she?'

We had a jar of her mother's fat home-marinated olives in the car, and the olive trees in the backyard were thriving - probably the only things on earth that could be fertilised by combining droppings from a Cairo mongrel and a family of Kos cats.

At Cobham, I phoned Harry Terrence with the good news, and the screws attached the phone to the tree pruner so that Harry himself could speak to Jimmy. Harry said, 'He's lucky he's not a Siege, or I couldn't do this.'



But he did it, and ten minutes later the Indigenous Boy Who Wasn't a Siege was sitting opposite me, Clare, Elinor, Antonelli, Ruth and some screws in a hospital cell, eating an egg sandwich, and shivering, as if shivering was the only thing that surprised him.

He asked if I had paper. I phoned Harry and the screws let me give Jimmy paper. I said to them, 'I get to keep the paper.'

I wrote on the torn-out notebook page: 'No names. What is the *one* thing?' He took the paper.

He wrote on it, holding my jumping pen like a steam drill between careful, traumatised fingers, and then handed the paper back to me. He'd written: 'JENOLAN CAVES. 11th July.'

We had the sort of eye contact that only happens at executions.

But Elinor had organised a doctor. The doctor came and Ruth was allowed to stay as Jimmy slept. He slept, with a sombre stillness, no longer with a caged tic, and instead it was Ruth who twitched, guarding.

Outside, Clare was worried: 'Anything at Jenolan Caves would be worse than Yarrangobilly.'



But at that point I was gripping both her arms protectively and boasting with cognitive exhaustion: 'But we do know about it now. And, darling girl, I managed them all. And I got to keep the paper.'



Chapter Fourteen:

It was still me who killed the children

Clare said, 'I've just realised how anti-Existential Post-Modernism is.' She had woken on George's arm, with the news on her phone full of English Labour Party rightwingers eating bitter crow about the sudden new success of Jeremy Corbyn. She said, 'It's because he's one person, with his poems, his bicycle and his allotment. You know who he is. That's good, just as I always know who you are, George,' with her dawn hand on his penis, as she re-oriented absently. 'I'm not *just* that', said George, 'but I do understand what you mean about fragmentation. It can be sad, though, like in Borges writing about Shakespeare: that the writer complains to God that he has no self, only his characters and God comforts him that He has just the same problem, calls him "My Shakespeare".' 'But that's *meant* to be sad,' she said. George said, 'It is quite the thing in Australia. Two of the Premier's prizes



were tributes to Pessoa. I remember: Patrick White quotes Henry Miller on "the great fragmentation of maturity." And there's that stuff in *Ulysses* all the time about metempsychosis.' He knew she liked *Ulysses*, but then she pointed out: 'That isn't wholly serious, Uncle Matthew - since Dedalus says "other I owed pound," and it is only that one person owes the debt.'

She gave his penis a courteous parting pat, as if it were a kitten, rolled on her back with a blanched face and said without inflection: 'It was still me who killed the children.' She shut her eyes, not to evade it: the memory, the picture. His face paled, too, with concentration, his eyes made wide with shadows, like the winter window now open behind him. He said, 'I think the key there is possession, the Borges ending has "*my Shakespeare*". There is unification in that: only one person can own so.' 'So we are unified in ourselves by possession,' she said, 'the continuity of faults and guilt and responsibility, each tragedy and victory.' She remembered Corbyn had said his cat



was a socialist because it shared its food with a stray. She said,

'I suppose you must begin with a sense of ownership so that

you know that you are sharing, but we should never forget,

my dearest George, that I thought I owned the children.' He did not

add his usual mantra: 'You were nine,' but leant his hand

deep near her shoulder in the sheet. She was saying his name

more than usual, needing the difference from her that it helped

her know, she thought. He said, 'Then there is Donald Trump,

plying his two identities like reins, and keeping all the horses

on the road somehow for a bit. Is he a Post-Modernist or is

he Existential? When he bombed the Syrian airbase in retaliation

for that supposed gas attack, he was showing the Deep State

he was tougher than Obama.' She said, 'He rang Syria first.

The place was empty. He's sick of Isis, and of MI6. He wants

to keep Syria together - hence the Russians. So Idris



is probably safe for a while. The Deep State in the U.S.
has only ever toyed with Israel, like an old dog
that's getting too expensive to feed. Trump's not Post-
Modernist, he's Existential, crammed full of his own
history, like an actor. What do you make of Harry Terrence
and Jenolan Caves?' The last question was the one
that was too much on first waking, but she could ask
it now that the other fears were spoken. He said, 'I've thought
about it. When he said as far as he was concerned, he didn't
know about Jenolan yet, but I could do what I wanted, as
he was organising Jimmy back to Ruth, I think in fact
he means it. I go to Jenolan, maybe, but the police not
so much. He thinks that would be dangerous for Charlotte.
He did say it would be night, no tourists. I think I just
confirmed to him some other information.' She asked,



'Will he tell you any more when you are boxing?', since
George had agreed to meet him at the Police Boy's Club this
afternoon. He said, 'I doubt it, but it means I'll have to beat him,
so that he wants me alive for the return match. Otherwise,
it's just like you. I've always let him win.'



Chapter Fifteen:

His hands can't hit what his eyes can't see

I objected, quoting Gertrude's summary of Hamlet: 'You think I'm "fat and scant of breath".'

Clare had taken one look at me limbering up in our bedroom for the boxing, and insisted we practise-box a round ourselves, to ensure my survival. I was hoping this might involve foreplay, but she did seem completely serious.

Her mother was in the kitchen, watching the latest *Twin Peaks* episode on a smart phone and discussing it disparagingly with a pirate in Reykjavik.

Clare said, 'They don't like it: Episode Seven and still no Audrey Horne. Look, it seemed to me that the problem with your boxing was that you still had the reflexes and the speed, but that your direction wasn't centred enough to connect with impact...'

I was wearing the new boxing gloves I was going to use on Harry. She untied one and I helped her on with my disintegrating spare pair. She began sparring at once, without any warning, and I pushed my hand back into the unfastened glove and countered the blows glove to glove accurately and



quickly, but - she was right - without enough directed force to unbalance her back on her heels.

At that moment, her phone rang. It was Sheridan in London. Clare explained what we were doing and Sheridan demanded I take the phone, then asked me: 'Are you boxing with a *pregnant woman*?'

Clare hissed in a theatrical whisper: 'How do you think I got pregnant?', but then saw contritely that I was losing equilibrium and explained: 'He's got to focus his energy or he's going to be flattened by a Deputy Commissioner. I'm not sure if I should be talking him up or talking him down. What do you think?'

'Oh, talk him down,' advised my daughter: 'It's Daddy. One talks him down.' We all said we loved each other and she went out to a midnight feast with her school pupils, who still seemed just as eccentrically obsessed with feeding her as she was with feeding them.

Clare actually didn't talk at all, but held up a cushion by its ivory lace ribbon and moved it around quickly and unexpectedly so that after a while I was punching it reliably against the wardrobe with an audible thump and rattle. She dropped it and met my gloves with hers again, so that I could connect the punches lightly, with more control but with enough momentum now for her to react back from the contact and use my energy to maintain her own.



I said, '*You* should be boxing Harry, not me,' but she frowned, again without levity:

'No - you're skipping and concentrating okay now, but you're going to need real power this afternoon. He'll have stored up a lot more strength than you remember him having. Guard your eyes.' Her glove had flipped across them, and I winced. I gestured clumsily at the heart-shaped cushion. She lifted it by the lace again - and this time my punch sent it spinning past her like a baseball out the door into the hall. She took off her gloves and clapped her hands together once, with the noise of a firecracker, in spontaneous approval. By then we were both almost laughing, but I realised that this rehearsal had given me access to stored energy rather than evaporating it.

The Police Boys' Club was crowded, as if expecting a good brawl. I wondered what sort of reputations Harry and I had actually acquired. Because of the venue, we consented to a rather theatrical drug test first: a tongue swab and breathalyser from one of Harry's deft but deferential male constables. We were in joggers, blue T-shirts and grey track pants. As well as citing the winter weather, Harry had felt his bony knees in shorts would be too distracting. I'd said I wouldn't have minded, as Clare said my own knees were still quite sexy.



The referee was female: a stylishly motherly Ethiopian lady in a hijab, whom I recognised as also a volunteer for the staunch local Labour MP. There was much cheering when we passed the drug tests, then the referee weighed us. Neither of us were going to make the 79.38 kilos for Light Heavyweight anymore, so she declared us both Cruiserweight - at least neither of us were over 90.72.

Just after the weigh in, I became aware that Clare, in the front row, had tensed and turned her head slightly. In the back row, Ruth had just come in with her arm around a quiet, cautiously-moving woman: Bryony. Harry noticed it, too, but assumed his perpetual unsurprised expression - that of a man recognising a signal. There was no sign of Charlotte, of course.

Harry and I touched gloves ceremoniously, then the referee guided us apart. Much as the audience would have appreciated it, we didn't box the professional twelve rounds, just the same amateur three rounds that the children did, but we gave each round three minutes, not two, with the usual minute break in between. Because of the timeframe and presumed audience attention-span, we began sparring frenetically at once. He was still wiry, and sharp-edged, but without quite my speed and heaviness. But I was out of practice and he wasn't, and he was a less logical, even more insecure fighter than I was. He had a slight paunch and I aimed for it constantly with my left



glove - not to double him up, but to unbalance him, sit him on the ground - as I protected myself in circling flutters with my right. He was aiming at my head - but again to physically disconcert, not disfigure. And, also as required by the venue, we were both talking ceaselessly, at the pace of manic rappers. After we'd insulted each other's knees, I wondered with what words Muhammad Ali would have taunted in such circumstances.

Harry had quoted him as he jeered at my whisking fists: 'Floats like a butterfly, stings like a bee', but I remembered the full quote and completed it: 'His hands can't hit what his eyes can't see,' as I jabbed in at his belly, connected just enough to create an involuntary start upward, and so use his right hook at my nose to unbalance him for a second. The referee called Round One on points for me.

We were certainly holding the audience. We both towed sweat off our bodies under the winter garb, and were too serious to speak to each other in this break. I knew he was thinking of something more distracting to say. Bryony? Charlotte? Schmidt? I was as eager to hear it as I was to win the contest.

He took the initiative at the start of Round Two. I stepped back suddenly, aiming once more at his balance, and he lunged too far forward, but steadied himself with a side-to-side sway and boxed in towards me from both sides as



if I were a punching bag, constricting my parrying blows. The referee pushed his wrists up, as - because of the angle - he was aiming lower, but then she stepped back, and we resumed the banter.

I said, 'You'd better come up with something distracting, old man. I'm not losing concentration here...' And I proved it by slicing an unexpected right hook up through his volley, clipping him on the chin.

He kept up the barrage, and whispered: 'Your grandson. What he told me. The silicon in the diamonds.' He'd distracted me with that alright.

I asked, also *sotto voce*, 'Schmidt?'

He nodded, puffing and watering from the eyes and nostrils. I started to ask him more, but dropped my guard for an instant. He tapped my cheekbone, we said something much more loudly about the smell of each other's sweat, and it was the end of that round. The referee gave more points from that round to him, so now Round Three was everything.

In the break, I puzzled painfully to follow the Schmidt/Diamond connection. Then I remembered that there had been talk of the Chinese launching a new quantum-powered satellite. Did it already exist? Was Schmidt procuring the silicon diamonds for Pine Gap? Were they better, more light-attuned than Idris had known? Or was it some last rip-off of Schmidt's, before he killed the appropriate lover and vanished somewhere in the Emirates? Harry wiped



his effort-gaunt face, tolerantly watching me arrive at these questions. The Spook side of things wasn't really his province, and he probably didn't care too much about what I surmised. His two priorities were Charlotte, and limiting any predictable local slaughter.

The Third Round was easier for me. We heckled each other about boxing technique with the affection of exhaustion and I kept my feet and hands moving until his own became slowly, fractionally more inaccurate.

For ten seconds, we were in too close and before the referee clucked her tongue and separated us I asked him one question, an underbreath 'Pine Gap?', and he nodded as his right glove shoved my shoulder.

I used the separating aftermath immediately to flurry him backwards, and his left glove went out to steady himself sideways on useless air. I brought my blow under his jaw in that opening, with all the directed force I'd applied earlier to the final cushion, but pulled most of the punch at the last minute, so that he could straighten up in dignity as the referee made the three minute call.

The kids seemed to applaud it all, especially a powerful policeman's benign vulnerability and, when we shook hands, he challenged me to come back so that he could secure his revenge. I agreed, explaining that I wouldn't be as lucky as this twice, and the audience gave a patronising but indulgent laugh



at my dutiful courtesy in contrast to the taut efficiency of the match. I saw Clare's mouth twitch, sharing their irony, but she had already found her way to Ruth and Bryony at the back.

I heard Harry mutter advice to me: 'Make sure Bryony will recognise you later,' then he gripped my shoulder painfully but warmly in farewell, and left with the smiling referee to visit the local Member.

I held Clare's hand, a gesture which her pregnancy made seem natural now in public. Close-up, I could see why Bryony was one of Schmidt's lovers, even if in the Matriarchal role. Her hair was dyed a middle-aged version of mouse, but it was sleek and stranded with deliberate, raffish style, and the grey in her skin wasn't dry but had a costly quality like silk or lilac. There was anxiety in her face, but it didn't line it. Her clothes were soft, casual, full of fetching pastels. She was clearly a woman adept at tying neck scarves. And she had friendly, lucent, attentive blue-glint moonstone eyes.

I could see that Clare was scrutinizing her thoroughly but discreetly, wondering how well she tended Charlotte. Her gaze kept returning to Bryony's manicured, moisturised still hands. Ruth was talking most, and almost happily, having talked earlier with Harry, and therefore looking forward less nervously to having Jimmy back from Cobham soon.



My victory in the match had made me a Dominant Male in this room, however weirdly and briefly, and Bryony automatically was directing all her focus on me. In order of female submissiveness, there's geisha and then there's gangster, as Clare had once observed (and was probably thinking again now).

Bryony said, 'I know nothing about boxing. But that was very exciting. I've never seen Commissioner Terrence in that light before.'

'Few do,' said Clare, but without hostility. It was crucial that Bryony not be alienated, and we all knew it.

I smiled at Bryony - it was easy enough: all that softness in her, and then the even greater flood of grateful softness in her response. She had the smile of a shy child without expectation given a delightful sweet for no reason. And her eye contact was very beautiful, very human. After a moment, she remembered to bestow it on Clare and Ruth as well. We all talked about the winter weather, and its effect on the bones. Then Ruth took her away to see how well the Shelter was going, in part thanks to her most recent donations. When she left, we all embraced her. My cheekbone was still sore from the boxing, and her face felt like a soft fresh lilac, lingering against it.

Clare wanted a pregnancy nap, and I wanted a shower, so we went back to her mother's. It was still early in the afternoon.



Clare said, 'And that was the woman who showed drugged Charlotte to the antique Bikie, after they'd pulverised him.' The pregnancy made her sleep unusually sudden, however, and she wasn't answering by the time I'd finished showering off the last sweat of battle.

An hour later, Sheridan rang from early morning London. Her voice was dispassionate with shock.

She said 'We went out in London for the midnight feast, and when we were coming home we saw that Grenfell Tower was alight. It burned right up. It's still on fire. There were people in all the windows. Children who thought they were going to be rescued. My children thought those children were going to be rescued. I haven't felt anything about it yet. I'm frightened what will happen when I do.'

Clare told her, 'You won't feel anything until you are able to endure it. You can only let it takes its own time.'

I asked Sheridan factual questions, because that is what one does, after I told her to drink sugary tea. People had jumped, been thrown out of windows. She said, 'They may not be counted in the death toll. Boris Johnson cut the safety regulations and fire services, but they wanted to show the Tories had improved things, so the statistics only show the deaths from actual burning.'



Every one else is supposed to be a homicide or suicide. I know, it already happened to one of my children's families.'

Clare looked up the news about it on her laptop. They were already naming the cladding as the cause: aluminium riddled with plastic and air pockets, put on to make the place less ugly to the wealthy neighbours, but cheap and grotesquely flammable. And only one exit, no sprinklers.

I remembered every past agony of seeing some face or other newly illuminated with the hope that one has arrived to rescue them, when one can't. When I couldn't.

Clare said, 'At least the place in Paris where I rescued Sophie and Florence had a fire-escape.' I also remembered again her fire terror, and - perhaps because I wasn't ready to acknowledge my own present horror - shuddered in empathy with hers.



Chapter Sixteen:

Hermitage

Now was the Tenth of July in winter, but last month's Solstice moon had blazed with strangeness: too harshly to see it well and Venus alone like a moon itself beside. Inside the moon's ghost circle there were three waning crescents too dazzling for the eye to see, each one so tight to the other it had only a vague periphery, but still they were clearly not one thing. Clare had photographed it from the back steps, sent the picture to cheer Sheridan in London, and also the excited Lithgow coven.

Now she sat with George on the chilly steps again, looking at it on her phone, as he already steadily drank rich Hermitage dark from the Rhone Valley, alone: preparation for aiming the gun. 'I shot better coming down last time,' he said: 'The mercenaries are right. One's really too old for steady aim unless one's in withdrawal.' Hands on her knees so that the strength of the earth flowed up her arms, she said, 'But, Jesus - the Temple of Baal?' He shrugged: 'It's only another cave at Jenolan.' 'But it's not,' she said, 'I've been



there when I was really young: about eight - before I was nine and the Angel of Death myself.' She was weighing her own irony on her heart like a stone, went on: 'It's a spooky place, spooky, and it must have reminded Andrew of some weird spooky things for him to suggest it to Schmidt as his place of revelation - and at One tomorrow morning!' 'Ruth said Schmidt was happy with the venue, though,' said George, 'that his lovers were okay with going there.' One of the cats - the brindle, smallest one - which seemed an instinctive familiar - stood on Clare's knee, with the faraway gaze of a tiger, tensed its bones, as she stroked it, encouraging it to knead her dressing gown, dream apparently of all secret to the human. 'They'd look really guilty if they didn't agree, the lovers,' she smiled, 'but they must be living in total terror.' 'But they always do that, don't they?' asked George. He was worried that the spicy, dulcet wine was too civilised to make him drunk, ensure the overly focused, target-centered withdrawal. Clare saw that he still twitched a little soberly, comforted 'Don't worry - you'll smooth out when the booze does, in the air. They always take their time, those chewy Rhones, and then



in a few hours time the sky spins.' The sky seemed to him to be already spinning on its own volition: starry as a glossy Van Gogh reproduction. He had been thinking vaguely indeed of Van Gogh since Bryony reminded him of gentle irises: but they've no perfume, he recalled, and hers was some new designer cologne: discreet but insistently strong. He said in a neutral tone, as if confessing: 'Harry sent me a silencer for the gun.' She stilled, with her fingers gripping fur: 'Well, we knew it was on, didn't we? Of course, you can't go alone. I'll come. I can concentrate on Charlotte. She will be there? I assume that was Schmidt's deal with Andrew?' 'And some promotion. Bryony told Ruth a lot, apparently.' Clare said, ' Well, they have a lot in common, the bruised matriarchy. But ask me what is in the Temple of Baal.' 'What,' asked George quietly, moving the cat to the top step, stroking its back firmly, then distributing cat-treats widely, in his cupidinous charity, including to the dog, Egypt, 'Is in it, then, that you so found it frightening when you were eight?' He folded his sober arms under her breasts from the higher step, so that her spine



rested back against him, her restless head beneath his chin, rolling back and forth so that in his stretched throat the veins grew and, too, grew in sensitivity, discerning hair from bone. She said, 'The cave called the Temple of Baal is eerily pretty. It's named after Elijah in the Bible. He fought against some prophets of Baal, the heathen god. He won and smote them.' 'Smote them?' 'Had them smitten. Killed. After the flames of God consumed his alter and his sacrifice of water, any other god like Baal was over, and so the drought was gone. The formations include really delicate shawls, a big Angel Wing. There's a natural statue of Baal in the wall, and most things there look like drooling teeth when they're not a frozen lily. There are other formations, named by some odd Freemasons. There's another cavern but our one's roof is vastly high. The stairs wind down it. They call the descent the Dragon's Throat. But the cave itself isn't wide, although some formations are intricate and deep all up and down. We can certainly find places there to hide. I remember a deep crevice fairly close to the top landing side. I could hide there, you at the bottom. We'd be separated, but it would save me from that mountain



of painful metal stairs.' These days walking on anything firm resonated sharply in her womb. Any freezer section in a supermarket ached. She went on: 'And don't say anything about me not going, because I'd miscarry from anxiety, waiting here alone.' 'I'd never thought to say that, anyway,' he lied into the pit next to her throat, the one the shoulder bone involuntarily shrugs and shuts at a mouth's intrusion. She again shrugged and pulled his hands up to her face, almost angry at sex that had any such embroidery. She wondered why she wanted it to be simple: sudden, like an accident, a wound. She wanted it to be stronger than the future, than to die. But other than its necessity, also not to signify, maybe, she thought, realising she was in depression. So did he - suddenly sympathised: 'If you did drink the wine, you'd cry.' 'I could cry anyway'. she said, turning to face him and closing her arms under his with her face against him. He rocked her in sex rhythm, and she thought: *we're still in love*, with wan stoicism, bleakly: this was really what a depressive needed: to be in prison again with a lover, both in danger, in a sepulchral underground cave out of Hammer Horror, with the life of a helpless baby



in the balance all the time. But, of course, the helpless one wasn't hers only, but also Charlotte. She watched the happy moonlit Egypt play with loud lollies for cats, and the poem about the haystack in the floods came back: that Tyffanie had said their little dog still watched for Charlotte, again and again each time a door was open. She said, 'It's lucky animals encircle us with our own feelings, hold us steady.' He said, 'You hold me steady.' She did try to cry. His skin smelt to her of the acid from the wine: 'Don't worry. You'll be drunk soon.' He objected: ' But if we had fucked, I wanted to do it sober.' She laughed: 'So you would still be in power.' Then the *Marche Militaire* played on his phone. Idris in Moscow again. He had just taken Florence and Sophie to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, and, when he said that, Clare's cold hand was tracing 'Hermitage' on the label of George's wine. It was a frequent serendipity: that one of spoken and printed word, but to her then it confirmed some fatalism. George knew Clare was fond of smooth gleaming malachite, asked had they seen it nearby where it furnished the Winter Palace. They had done, so she



took the phone to hear about it, listless, but then warm when Florence described the pillars' black-emerald green. When Idris reclaimed his phone, Clare asked him why Schmidt was after the silicon diamonds, if they were okay, and if he really had them. 'He has three,' said Idris, 'and they are not perfect, but better than the ones that I have seen. There's something for Pine Gap to work on. But someone close to him is being paid by another wacko section of the American Deep State: I think old Kissinger men don't want to stress the Chinese Satellite team. That person had promised them the diamonds. It's pretty small game, actually, for Schmidt, but, dude, he can't let it happen, for PR reasons, can he?' She asked, 'Do you know the name of the person?' He said, 'Only what we all understand: that it's one of the gentleman's lovers. Grandpa's CIA friend in Langley might know it, does he?' 'No,' said George, 'he doesn't. I've already asked. But he confirmed there's a clan within the Deep State that didn't like Obama and Hillary and their Pivot Towards Asia containing China too heavily, and who unpivot that pivot slowly with plenty of money.



Are you still phoning your mother?' 'Yeah, dude, especially since she was so upset about the fire in London. She and I talk all the time, you know.' Sheridan herself didn't seem to know that as much, thought George, but the boy did try. After the conversation, Clare said: 'Recently Ruth told me that her people called Jenolan "the Dark Place". I mean, that wasn't just because they ran out of firesticks. Her tone was the one she uses for Andrew's private life.' 'I agree,' he said, 'it has a strange fog of foreboding. Lets go in.'

They gave the animals one last hug. He gripped her hand in his left, the bottle, glass, in the other. In the bedroom, he tried the silencer on the Glock, and it was right. Lying down, she unbuttoned the pintucked silver dressing gown, her own spread silver - the hair - giving warmth in the night room around her breasts' winter roses. His mouth smoothed their skin rounder easily, because of the pregnancy, smoothed round and free the folded labia, cloaked clitoris. Anything reciprocal would be, they both knew, a lack of courtesy, an insult to concentration. She made her gripping fingers, however, on the blanket, clutch his arm supporting her, and tossed and twisted on it, excited that the human



yielded less than fleece's docility, because it had sensation. He wanted her to rise up in his arms, not fall back drowned, in any crucified position. The fingers on his arm allowed that situation. She dragged herself forward, knelt on his thigh with one knee, but weightless as Fonteyn, his thumb and forefinger between the vaginal lips, on the clitoris, still caressing in a pattern. She did come upright, tight hands on his neck and shoulder, then bent her head with long sighs into his mouth, that was open like a runner gulping water from a fountain. He held lightly, hands on her waist, enough for penetration, she on him moving so the womb felt no pressure, until they came quickly, as one person. She lay on both his arms then,

theatrically,

as if she were a burden, and he gave her a sip of his wine. She slept and he finished it slowly, watching his own thoughts flow past him, past the dawn, the passing noon, until she woke, read him the Morris poem, some A.E. Housman: "This was the parting that they had... Be still my soul, be still, it is but for a season..." At last, the grieving Tennyson: "Break, break, break, on thy cold grey stones, O sea..." He



slept in turn, head hard-heavy on her breastbone. The setting sun
woke him coldly and they drove up to Jenolan.



Chapter Seventeen:

Temple of Baal

The final road to Jenolan Caves wound down a long way in the dark, with a smattering of sleet making whirling vortexes on the windscreen. It was too cold for animals to be foraging this late, but some might still be attracted out of their burrows by the road's warmth. To warn off potential road kill, Clare had attached a couple of loud kangaroo whistles to the front of the car, Sophie's Mitsubishi, and any speed over 20 kilometres was accompanied by their thin relentless wailing. I drove it all on high beam. We certainly didn't look furtive.

She said, 'Tyff said Andrew will make sure we can get in about eleven o'clock, after the Ghost Tour finishes. He's also making sure the electricity will be off, so we'll need torches. We'll have to find our way to the Baal cave through the Binoomea Cut. It's a really long passageway. There are a couple of other caves along it, too: The Ribbon and the Orient. I remember the Orient. It's unforgettably pretty. There's a smaller cavern before the main Baal cave. There will be Bikies about on watch until near the Temple of Baal. Then it's all Schmidt's bodyguards and professional mercenaries. They won't



have time to search the venue properly first. The stairs are incredible. They'd need to abseil. But I'm really worried about maverick Bikies. And some of those still don't like Andrew.'

I said, 'He paid the money back to Orchard Hills. But I agree. We'll keep our profiles low at the entrance and in the Cut. Are there hiding places in the passage?'

She thought about it: 'I don't think so. We might have to rely on the dark.'

I said, 'The name Temple of Baal always reminds me of the one Isis blew up in Syria.'

She said, 'No one's going to miss Isis. Except MI6, maybe.'

I said, 'MI6 have never accepted Suez. At least now they're finished in the Levant.'

The political stichomythia indicated more nervousness than we seemed to be showing otherwise.

I went on, as a Shape - probably wombat- stretched out a hairy, clawy paw at the roadside but then thought better and ambled away - 'I was frightened as a kid when I read *Tom Sawyer*: Tom and Becky being chased so ruthlessly by Indian Joe through his cave.'



She smiled: 'Florence and I saw the movie. I think it's that dripping dankness that scares people. And the mystery of where things really are, and what they are.'

I agreed: 'And being hunted on someone else's territory.'

She qualified: 'But Schmidt doesn't own Jenolan. Maybe it's Andrew's territory by now?' Then she added, in a wry, grim murmur: 'Or maybe it will be ours.'

A screeching doubled-up ball of fur, scales and teeth rolled across our path, in a sort of Ying and Yang arrangement, and vanished in the inky, icy scrub. Fortunately, The Mitsubishi was used to breaking sedately without skidding.

I asked, 'Who were *they*?'

She said, 'Ruth said the Gundungurra people told her Darug that the whole area was created by a giant eel spirit and a quoll or native cat spirit having a fight. It looks like they're still at it. It wasn't all a Dark Place, you know. They used to take people to the underground river water for healing. These days, it's called "The Styx", though.'

We parked near the Guest House, mingling with the last of the Ghost Tour going exhaustedly to bed. Then Andrew's blackout happened without warning, but only in the Caves area, not the accommodation, so it looked like normal process.



Clare and I had a couple of 100 LED torches, and an assortment of other pocket battery lights. We wore padded ski coats. The door to the Cut was open, but a couple of Bikies were smoking next to it. We greeted them cheerfully as fellow tourists. They seemed to be waiting for Schmidt's people, but the smoke from their roll-your-owns was incriminatingly cloying, and they walked away behind some bushes to finish them.

We walked into the tunnel without hesitating, and hurried on the smooth floor in the darkness for a couple of minutes before turning on the weakest torch we had. Halfway through, we turned even that off, because voices were billowing and distorting closer and closer behind us. We ran.

We tried to run softly, which involves keeping your steps higher, quicker, not touching the ground so much. Clare was in front of me, and I had to maintain a little distance in case she stumbled. The voices were raucous, derisive and Western Suburbs: still Bikies not Schmidt, so they weren't meant to enter further than the Cut. Now nervous, they were making traditional anal jokes about the tunnel in relation to their girlfriends and boyfriends. Clare gave a tiny, involuntary exasperated moan, as if, after everything else that had happened, she was about to be murdered by an RSL Smoko.



They weren't so close that we could see any light behind us yet. We used the muffled torch again, remembered the visitor's map, and felt our way into the first of the two Temple of Baal caves. Inside, we briefly used one of the painful 100 LEDs. The place was distractingly beautiful, glinting back at us luxuriously from beds of oval snowy cave pearls. The voices had receded to leering echoes.

We found the tunnel to the larger Temple of Baal cave, and stumbled through it in the dark again, just in case.

The Temple of Baal was still empty. It was as physically deep, and as spiritually self-preoccupied as the inside of any small mountain. There was a night sound of water - apparently a massive secret lake leaked somewhere above it, undiscovered even by the most ardent searchers. Its furniture was as predicted: splendid shawls of limestone, a red stone altar for Baal, a white one for Elijah, The fine wing and angel formations, the wrinkled, layered and oddly convincing accidental depiction of Baal himself at the top. But the depth was extraordinary - the 100 LED was necessary to show the tiers of metal stairs and illuminate the lumpy russet rocks at the bottom. That was the part they had decided to name 'Hell'. Clare shone the torch back up to the gnarled pale intricacies of the roof, which was, of course, 'Heaven', then sideways to reveal the huge niche she had already chosen. I helped her



scramble into the back of it, then left her with a hunting knife and most of the torches, kissing her impulsively on the forehead - which had in itself a moist chill limestone quality right then, and tasted of profound, inaccessible water.

I climbed and slid down the stairs, holding the solid railing. There were plenty of ledges and rock-hidden natural trenches on the floor. She lent out, looked down and nodded energetically to signal that she couldn't see me from where she was. Then I loaded the Glock, attached the silencer, and we turned off the torches and waited. There was a quality of intimacy and comfort in the darkness here: it wasn't the inhuman force I had expected.

Schmidt's party arrived soon, talking in normal conversational tones: Schmidt himself, the three main bodyguards, two armed mercenaries in flack jackets, Bryony carrying Charlotte asleep in a front pouch, Quentin, Edmund Silver and Andrew. Bryony put Charlotte at her feet in the pouch on a rug. There were no surprises, no Agatha Christie revelations. They must have all realised by then that the traitor was Bryony. She had probably taken enough benzos to be calm until this point, but now when Schmidt nodded at her curtly, she became hysterical. She wailed like an animal, but the words were discernible: 'I only wanted enough money to get away, get away, *get away...*'



But he pulled her to him. He had something in his hand and showed her. From a sudden dull glitter, I realised he was showing her the three silicon-impregnated industrial diamonds. She hadn't even seen them before. The Deep State faction had only paid for basic information. It must have seemed safe enough.

She was wearing the same rainbow pastel neckscarf she had worn at the boxing match, and he loosened it and wound it a little around his fist. There was a jutting stone outcrop above them, and he tied the scarf around it unexpectedly, using a hangman's knot, and released her weight, while she was still trying to caress him. Her feet were an inch above the platform.

His expression and his movements were so smooth, so civilised that I wondered for a second if this were some sort of accustomed sex game, and that he would support her or release her in time. But he didn't. He watched calmly, almost with a look of detached mischief, as her death struggle became increasingly contorted. He hadn't bound her hands or feet, and her fingers clawed with alternating panic, horrible pain and terrible final intelligence to untie the scarf. The rock to which he had tied it so casually looked like limestone not granite, and I wondered if I could shoot off the outcrop with the silenced gun pointed upward through such dancing shadows.



Charlotte woke at Bryony's writhing feet and began to utter a strange, distorted low cry. Clare couldn't endure any of this for another second, and began to leave her crevice. I saw the glint of her knife. There was no more time. I fired two shots at the outcrop and severed it on the second one. Bryony fell the inch to the stair platform, but sideways with a noise like a third gunshot.

Schmidt looked as if awoken unpleasantly from a musical reverie and gave a startled gesture to the men. They shot Bryony three times at once, before she could even move on the wet steel.

I wriggled as quickly as possible away from my shooting position, under an overthrusting low ledge I'd already chosen. The men were peering down the impossible stairs and then started to descend, but then there was a noise like a deliberately amplified grunt for help from Schmidt.

Edmund Silver had inched even closer to him, and pushed some sort of illegal switchblade contraption into him three times: under ribs, under throat, under armpit. Then he released Schmidt from what was clearly still an adoring embrace between them and leapt onto Bryony, also with recognisable adoration, as if to defend her from further shooting.



I had a subliminal impression of a child trying to protect both his parents from each other simultaneously in a feral physical domestic. One of the men dispatched Silver almost absent-mindedly with a bullet to the occiput and then they all returned to the platform to concentrate on rescuing Schmidt. From my viewing position below, Clare was visibly upright like an alert white hart poised in the crevice, with Andrew standing in front of it and watching but not touching the paroxysmal Charlotte.

Almost at the same moment as knifing Schmidt, Silver had punched Quentin out of the way, and she was staggering against a railing, the top half of her body horizontal the equivalent of four stories up in the air. Unrecognisable in blood, Schmidt stepped precisely towards her, then abruptly lifted her high in his arms, his legs braced by the railing. He seemed about to hurl her and himself down the full cavelength to the stone-spiked floor. He was huge in that chiaroscuro, a looming composite of arbitrary light and shadows.

Then he crumpled at the knees, sagged down on the platform, and all the men, including Andrew, converged around the couple, separating, lifting, until they all left by the Dragon's Throat, carrying Schmidt and Quentin correctly, as if they were soldiers in triage.



Bryony pushed off the weight of the dead Silver, gathered Charlotte to her again, despite the bleeding, and walked quite sedately with her away into the second cave, as if not wounded. But Bryony was dying, or they wouldn't have left her.

Clare and I had decided earlier not to betray each other's presence, and she didn't wait for me. She clambered onto the platform and then ran after Bryony and Charlotte. I dragged myself - dragging was quicker than walking - urgently back up the stairs by the railing, with the Glock in my other hand. Looking up, I saw the figure of Baal illuminated by the light from Silver's uptilted dropped torch. The head was only a flickering knob, but for a second it took on a benign, even if arch, smiling expression, and - to my exhausted eyes - for that second was Rosaleen Norton.

That actually made me feel safer. I was operating from nothing but the pit of my aching chest now, following not directing my own actions. I went out into the first cave. There was some blood on one pad of the cave pearls. Back in the Cut, I could hear the men shouting far away at the entrance. I followed black blood drips into another cave: the Orient. This was reputedly the loveliest cave, and I was so mentally ungoverned that I looked forward to its beauty with excitement, despite every horror I knew I would experience in there.



By the time I entered the Orient Cave, someone - maybe Andrew back at his caretaking post - had turned the lights and sound back on, but there seemed to be some confusion and distortion in the wiring system. I heard a little creature's cry of relief somewhere from Charlotte. There were coloured lights thrown haphazardly on different features, but some of it was plain, and the music was rippling water effects - like a child who has just discovered the higher keys on a piano - combined with *The Ride of the Valkyries*. This seemed to be the wrong cave for that. I'd read it belonged in the Baal. But in front of me was a formation of such irresistible fineness that it stopped everything else in me for a second. The plain clear light was floating on a white inclining bank of intricately furrowed but luminously smooth limestone, with a cluster of long tasseled objects like sea plants embedded in the top. These showed delicate tints from iron, but in the sweet colours of skin, not its usual salty rust.

I remembered Proust writing that one can't appreciate beauty when in severe sadness, but I wanted to add something about that point in which one is wracked with anxiety, and beauty is the only thing one can experience, perhaps just as those in grief always obsess on details. I wanted to tell that to Clare, and the need to do so reincarnated me - or maybe disincarnated me enough for me to continue.



She was searching ahead of me in the cave. Charlotte seemed to have become separated from Bryony and to have been crawling lost in the motherless dark. Now she was talking to herself more quietly in toddler mutterings somewhere behind some glorious fan formations. I think both her voices were assessing the light, reassuring each other that it was real.

'Very small children do like to confirm the reality of things,' observed Clare in her normal voice, so that Charlotte could be reassured by it - and also that I could. Charlotte peered over the top of a very pretty rainbow-lit stalagmite and Clare approached her, but by inches, as you would a round-eyed kitten.

I moved in the other direction, looking and listening for Bryony. Behind some rocks, I could hear unmistakable Cheyne-Stokes breathing. My first hope was that she wasn't conscious. I climbed over the rocks and knelt beside her, then supported her with my legs tucked sideways underneath her on the cruel stones. There was at once that feeling of her ineradicable softness. I thought again of lilacs. Her body could be gathered up against one without effort. Even if the relaxation were also a form of instinctive numbness, it seemed to make her dying easier for us both. I was waiting apprehensively for that moment in Cheyne-Stokes sometimes when the difficult slower breathing alerts the sufferer and they resist and panic, but her eyes retained a gentle focus looking up at me: I was a kind man, I was



holding her, it was all as it should be. There wasn't much blood around us. She had already lost most of her body fluids when she was wandering with Charlotte.

I told her: 'I shot the stone down,' but I doubt if it meant anything to her: perhaps that I had a need to be praised, but she knew she needn't meet anyone's needs now. It seemed as if there was no end to her softness, her ability to be gathered closer in to my chest. She turned her face into it, but I doubt if she could hear the galloping Valkyrie or see the unsettling LEDs. The broken breathing resumed at intervals in my grasp.

I looked up. Time had passed, because Clare had picked up Charlotte, who was smiling, and was carrying her and dancing her around the cave to the Wagner. Round and round, then look at me, round and round, then look at me, round and round... like Charlotte's little dog on the haystack, I thought.

I saw that Clare was looking at Bryony, who had turned her head from my chest and was gazing around, still calm, but with pre-death clarity. I couldn't feel her breathing now at all. Clare brought Charlotte over to us quite naturally, and used my shoulder as a balance to sit beside us, still carrying her.



Clare kissed Bryony's cheek, showing her Charlotte, who kissed her, too. Bryony looked at Charlotte with all the surprise, pleasure and approval any child would wish to remember, and then her face's astonishing gentleness closed itself away against my body again.

After a while, I also kissed her, on the lips. Clare had carried the now-sleeping Charlotte and sat cradling her on a rock, even more like a displaced mermaid in those childlike coloured lights.

I put Bryony's body in a comfortable-looking position and lifted my ex-legs up from the stones. When I could walk, and was carrying Charlotte down the well-lit Cut, I asked Clare, without distance or accusation: 'When they died, did you kiss your brother and sisters like that?'

She answered, in the same tone: 'I don't remember. I hope so.'



Chapter Eighteen:

Running around in circles, loudly

It was late August, but the spring was always early here: the wattle already shivering in new sun. Tyffanie had asked them over. They went with Ruth and Jimmy.

Charlotte was with the chihuahua, at play outside on a new-cut stack of hay: they were running around in circles, loudly.

George did remark: 'That's my life story' to the others, but they thought he meant victory in retrieving Charlotte, and he thought maybe that this would be too pedantic to deny.

Clare was relaxing rather tensely in her third trimester, and Tyffanie showed them a postcard from 'Andy



in Los Angeles. He's there with his lady' -

she meant a pro - 'He's really doing many

jobs for Mr. Schmidt, while he's poorly. Andy

sent Charlotte this.' It was a giant teddy

of the gift shop sort, all pink and ribbony.

She added, 'Mr. Schmidt sent her some money.

I thought why not take it? And Granny' -

she looked at Ruth - 'said he'd be angry

if we don't.' 'Well, we wouldn't want any

more anger from Mr. Schmidt,' said the irony

Clare was achieving, softly. 'Did you know he

is marrying Quentin?' asked Ruth, uneasily.

George said, 'I don't think her mother is happy.'

He'd seen a photo of Quentin recently,

the satin scarf at her throat tied expertly.



We stayed for stoical coffee. The baby
rushed in with the dog to hug them wildly,
then danced back out with Jimmy,
who began to build her a house out of grassy
straws. They left him with that cousin, peacefully,
and Tyffanie, now free.

Ruth came back with them to catch up belatedly
with Coral, but she was shopping. Then
in the spring-dappled lounge room, suddenly
Clare said, 'My water's broken.' She
grabbed several bags from the kitchen tidy,
and George by the arms, while he phoned commandingly
the ambulance, but they wouldn't be in time.



Chapter Nineteen:

No geography

I was astonished again at how much of the lower body opens: the perineum and labia all pushed aside and back to the edges of the white ocean, suddenly no fixed places, no geography. Ruth was helping, but as she said, 'It's never the same twice.'

When Sheridan was born, I had been birth coach for Heather, but she had understandably mainlined Pethidine almost from the beginning, and the idea of coaching Clare at anything was absurd.

I kept needing to remind myself the baby was breathing through the cord, not choking on endless mucus. Otherwise, my memories of Sheridan's childhood asthma were going to screw my judgment totally.

Clare was functioning much better in the indescribable agony than she would had she not been giving orders. She gave orders. The contractions were massive and stretching out the entire pelvic wall. It really wasn't just an excremental thrust - more like a lung trying to expel a choking obstacle, and her urge to panic and ask for help was obviously compulsive, but she still, in



her best big sister mode, summed all things up rationally, and made decisions. We complied.

In its long sea of mucus, the little head with the frail armour of vernix and tiny dark curl of hair bobbed out slowly through the swirl and swell from the labour, and Clare pushed as if defeated but then with renewed deliberation, while pulling Ruth's hands to it. Ruth grasped it by the shoulders and handed it to me. Stunned by the air, it coughed, but cried.

Because she had taken no painkillers, Clare became unexpectedly unconscious, but - for the same reason - she unexpectedly regained full consciousness, levered herself up on my arm, then grabbed her phone with one blood-streaked hand and the still-corded baby awkwardly with the other.

I said, 'You'd better break this to Florence gently. It's a boy.'



Chapter Twenty:

With the side open

In a few days, George drove them home from hospital, the boy in the back seat in a baby capsule, Clare on the phone again to Florence who had said firmly: 'I'm actually pleased that I am still your only daughter,' while Sheridan had said the same thing to George last night. So that was alright. In bed, they rested with George's arm underneath her, her arm beneath the baby asleep beside her in a crib, with the side open, touching her like a wing. The lochea was heavy and everything had blood's simplicity. Her mother brought them tea.

The hospital had served more sugar than a prison. Breath from the baby was as pungently sweet as his skin. His nappies smelled like a corner shop of broken biscuits: everything remembered and reassuring, meant to charm



against anything that might expose him in the forest.

Outside in Coral's garden, the half apple had grown into three thin saplings for this season. When he was born, George had pressed down the aureole so that the baby could fit its mouth to the nipple. Clare couldn't discern if he were actually drinking, but he didn't seem unhappy. Her womb tightened back against her spine in a fist, warning how his loss would feel, as she fed him.



Chapter Twenty One:

The freedom of the world

Her milk was quite ample now, and she sat feeding him, but functionally, detachedly and with a sad expression. He was an oddly silent baby, not an empty-breast-screamer like Idris or Sheridan. He was clearly Clare's thoughtful child, but she said 'I don't feel anything for him as a person.'

I said, 'That's pretty predictable. You felt something for your brother and sisters, and you killed them.'

She said, 'He looks like you. He has your quiet eyes.'

But they were her own enigmatic lapis lazuli. Maybe a touch of my brown-grey, though. They might change. I walked the room with him, anyway, although he was so tranquil, and she watched me. It was still her I wanted miserably to hold, but her whole visage warned at that moment against it. She was holding her upper arms and rocking imperceptibly, as if that met some atavistic norm.

I said, 'You do actually look maternal when you sit like that.'

She said, 'I thought I'd feel like I do with Florence: want to talk and play with him all the time.'



I said, 'He's a bit young. When you rescued Florence and Sophie, Florence was a much older baby.'

He was unusually small, though, even for his few days. Idris and Sheridan had been plump and labile. This was like holding a miniature Clare. He seemed infinitely breakable. But, also like her, he wasn't non-relational. He was focusing on me and resting his curly Royal Doulton head inside my elbow. I smiled at him, so that he would get the trick of smiling. I thought: it will be easier for her, once he smiles. I didn't feel related to him, but, then, I didn't feel related to her.

I said, 'You'll have to call him something. *Baby Collins-Jeffreys* isn't going to hack it much longer.'

She revived by teasing somewhat, shrugging: '*You* call him something, George.'

But it seemed vital that she did. I said, 'I'm no good at names. If he was a girl, he was going to be "Julia",' but she knew I was lying. Still considering the name, she reached out for him suddenly and I whisked him into her arms. She supported the little serious wobbling head in her serious little hand and they studied each other with their wide, limpid eyes.

I said, 'He's trying to name you.'



She said, 'I don't think I'm going to be "Mummy".'

I said, "'Clare"'s still good. I don't think he'll call me "Daddy".'

I thought of Sheridan calling me that, in her usual manipulation, kindness and exasperation. It didn't seem to be anyone else's word.

I said, peculiarly cheerful: 'He's got a sister in her forties. Don't let her name him, though. "Idris" is Welsh for "fiery lord".'

She smiled fully, 'Well it suits Idris.' She extended the smile's direction to the baby, then sighed, 'But not this one. What's a calm name?'

I asked 'In Welsh?'

She said, 'Fuck, no.'

I said, "Daniel OConnell said the freedom of the world isn't worth a drop of blood, but we can't call him "Danny".'

She said, 'I'd like him to be like Jeremy Corbyn: you know, radical but viable, and happy, sort of low key. I think he could be like that.'

The baby seemed interested. I objected, 'But not "Jeremy".' I wanted her to take charge of the situation, but democracy has some limits.



She asked, 'What about "Corbyn"? It is quite a popular name now. He wouldn't feel self-conscious. You could call a girl that, too.'

I said, 'I think it comes from crows or ravens: dark hair - but he's got that.'

Her eyes, my hair - but of course her hair had been brown before her murders.

She said, 'Not crows, but I do always like those little ravens in the Snowies - that they survive so high up, that's all.' She addressed him directly: 'Corbyn Collins-Jeffreys.' He responded to her new, amused conversational tone with a finer, attentive new focus.

I said, 'Well, that's it, then.' It was impossible now that he be anything else. Now he was who he'd always been, and indeed that was all.

