

Old  
Scores  
David  
Whish-  
Wilson



FREMANTLE PRESS

# 1.

Blake Tracker laced his Dunlop Volleys with the green ribbons he'd stolen from the sewing shop, tied the double knot his father taught him.

'Bout the only useful thing he *had* learnt from his pops, this knot – specially good for footy boots; never came undone.

He'd learnt how to fight from his mum. That and how to run.

His Longmore cellie, Peter Parkhill, was still awake. Skinny white arms catching the moonlight, pale face and nothing eyes. Was looking at the calendar blu-tacked to the wall, as he did every night. No titty shots were allowed in juvie, so the calendar picture was of the Perth beach: cobalt waters and white sands and brown bodies. November, 1983. Parkhill liked to cross the days as they passed – the last thing he did before going to sleep. November 23 waiting for the rip-slash of a Parkhill fingernail.

Parkhill was a skinhead and as soon as he turned eighteen was going to be deported to England. Seemed happy about it. Had taken a shotgun to a posh party in Claremont and blown the feet off a mod enemy.

In Longmore the Nyungar boys had done Parky over so many times they'd got bored of it. Skinhead style, the way ten of *them* would bash a black kid if they got you cornered on Hay Street, day or night.

But they hadn't broken him. Just one of his eyes drooped beneath the waxy scar that his father had caused, when Parkhill was a kid.

Not a bad cellie, for a Pommy bastard. Had even learnt a few words of Nyungar from the others, and Wongi from Blake. Reckoned that Nyungar sounded like Klingons speaking, but Wongi sounded like wog lingo.

Blake stood and swung his arms, jogged on the spot, tried to settle the nerves. He adjusted his balls, smoothed his green tee-shirt, pushed curls from his eyes.

Felt the bruises. Still had a broken nose and three bust ribs. Fingers on his left hand no use.

Soon as he decided, he'd stopped being afraid. It was all about *the thing* now, getting it done. Before and after, gone. Just the thing, what he had to do.

No ifs or buts. It was kill or be killed. Him or them.

He took his ID card and showed it to the light. Pressed it lengthwise in his fingers, felt the blade drop through the slit he'd worked in there. Drew the razor blade out with his teeth until it formed a nice long edge. Cut a man's throat, no problem – and it was men he'd soon be fighting.

Blake'd used the razor blade to make tattoos on the others, had driven the screws mad trying to find it. Every time he showed his ID to get through a door he'd wanted to laugh. 'Here you go, Boss.'

But they never found it. Had confiscated all the Bics instead.

Cigarette ash worked just as well.

Carve the design into the flesh, rub in the ink, or the ash. Let it heal.

Ten ciggies per tatt. Had 'em lining up. His own designs, mostly.

Parky had one on his left forearm. Spurs, whatever that meant.

It was nearly time. The hour after lockdown, time for the screws to watch a bit of TV, eat their dinner, share some jars. Make sure the Super wasn't working late.

Blake had taken the beatings every night for a week, but he wasn't going to take it any longer. He knelt and ducked and weaved, solid on his base, feet spread. Sparred with his moon shadow. Bust ribs slowing him down. Unable to close his left hand. Right hand OK.

He still had his blade. He had his legs. He had his teeth.

Whatever it took.

He looked down at Parky, and for the first time saw him afraid. Eyes bright. Parky sighed, started to get up.

Blake stood over him. 'You stay down. What your white mates say? You fightin' on a blackfella's side?'

The words had their effect. Parkhill turned to the wall.

The lock clicked in the door.

It was a screw, but alone. Irish Pete. Truncheon still belted down. Face red, ciggie burning at his side. 'They ain't messin', Blake. They're comin' shortly. No point bein' stubborn.' He looked warily over at Parkhill. 'You don't get to say no, not after tonight.'

Blake dropped his shoulder, took the stance. 'You a good bloke, Irish Pete. But I ain't sayin' yes. That last boy got caught, they added two years. I'm goin' to Freo in a week, black 'n' blue maybe, but I'm walkin' into my adult time, not lookin' back.'

Irish Pete shook his head, looked again at Parkhill, trying to work out if he was asleep. 'You don't understand, son. You don't *get* to say no. Not anymore. They're gonna make an example.'

The Irishman did an imitation of a noose around his neck, and tugged, bug-eyes and tongue lolling out.

Blake's body understood, before he did. Knees went wobbly. Guts coming up inside him. Power out in his arms.

Held the stance, breathing like he'd run a mile.

Nowhere to run. He shook his head, tried to clear his ears.

'I ain't sayin' yes.'

He didn't know where the words came from, but he meant them.

Irish Pete shook his head. Looked down the row of cells, to the staff-room. Looked at his watch. Spat on the floor.

'C'mon boy, get ...'

Blake didn't need to be told. He slid past the Irishman and skidded down the hall. Past the dark cells of his mates. Past the roster board where the bastards had crossed out the 'e' from his name. 'Blak Tracker.' Discovered the door to the yards ajar. Bloody Irish Pete. The moon on his swollen face now, arms pumping, feet slapping the packed earth as metre by metre he built his run-up to the wall, taking off and flying, flying ...

## 2.

Frank Swann parted the bedroom curtains. It was a spring day and the pigface was flowering in orange dabs across the garden. The sky was a cool blue and stitched with threads of white cloud, the southerly tousling the heads of the street trees. He checked his watch and went to the telephone in the front room. Just on seven it rang, as he knew it would. Dennis Gould was as punctual as he was reliable. Swann answered and flicked the switch to initiate the recording. Gould was Swann's best researcher, you could even call him a partner, but now he was on the run. Trevor Dragic's thugs had seen to that.

'Dennis.'

'Swann.'

Their code for everything's well. Swann heard a road train rattle past, the wind in the mouthpiece. Imagined the dust and heat of the Nullarbor – red dirt and hot wind and crows moaning on the wires, Gould limping to the public phone at whatever roadhouse.

'I'm staying at a surf break called Cactus just the other side of the border – there's a campground there. Got a caravan with a view of the Bight.'

'Right for money?'

'Right enough. Any sign of Dragic?'

Swann grunted. 'Presumed overseas. Think we should give it a week.'

'Alright. It's not too bad here. Been getting a bit of fishing done. Salmon are on. Bloke next to me's got a jerry-rigged smoker, a converted fridge.'

'How far to the roadhouse?'

'Bout fifty k, round trip. I'll check in every two days, same time.'

'Make it earlier. The new job – I've got to be on deck at seven, in town.'

Swann hung up, checked his watch again. Three days ago Gould had

been snatched from the street by four bikies, taken to the hills and made to dig his own grave. Forced to lie facedown and make his peace with the dirt. Had genuinely thought it the end. No mercy in the voice of the man with a shotgun. Gould still had no idea why they hadn't finished him off; instead asked him how much money he had – a few grand in cash at home. They gave him a ride back into town, blindfold on. Waited on the street while he packed a bag, then forked over his life savings. They followed his Triumph out onto Great Eastern Highway – the road to Adelaide.

Swann cinched his suit jacket around the top button, heard the sound of the V8 chugging down the street.

The delivery of his new staff vehicle was scheduled for seven am.

He gave himself a once-over. His old police boots had come up with polish and the blue woollen suit fitted him well. His hair was combed and his eyes were shielded by new sunglasses, chosen by his daughters.

Ray-Bans, cut in hard angles like he remembered from the fifties. Expensive, but then again, he had just been paid. Enough to gift each of his three daughters a grand and to bury the rest under the lemon tree out the back. Trevor Dragic had apparently fled the country, back to Macedonia, forfeiting his bank accounts and property to the company liquidator, who in turn had paid Swann in full.

For the first time in months, Swann was ahead of the game, and today was a fresh start.

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The Holden Statesman reared into the driveway and settled like a giant cat, purring deep and regular.

A Stato would do him just fine. Bigger than his usual ride, the five-litre beast made affordable by the deal he'd signed – staff car and petrol costs in the contract.

He'd been sharing his wife's Datsun 120Y these past years through a long run of sixties Holdens – bought cheap and fixed on the weekends and given to his daughters as they came into their majority. A Kelly-green HK for Louise, a red-over-white EK for Sarah and, most recently, at her request, a Lincoln-green Brougham for Blonny, his youngest. It'd taken him three years to restore the salvaged car to its former glory, long enough to get used to the air-conditioning, the electric windows and leather seats.

Heenan, the premier's flunky, stepped out of the Holden onto the driveway, but the driver did not.

Swann raised his eyebrows at Heenan, who hoisted his trousers over his gut and cracked his ankles, rolled his neck. 'Nice suit,' he said, in that quiet voice of his. Quiet and wet like medicine in the ear. 'Your car's down the street, Frank. By the bakery. Here are the keys.'

Swann took the keys from Heenan's hot fingers and saw the Holden logo and nodded his thanks.

'You got the pager?' Heenan asked, and Swann showed it, although he didn't know how it worked. 'You'll get a number when it's time to meet. Call it and get directions. We could be anywhere this morning. Wait in your office. The phone there hasn't been security cleared. You might start on that.'

Heenan clambered behind the dark doors of the Statesman, which rolled into the street. Its tinted windows revealed nothing as it cruised up the hill.

Swann turned the keys and retrieved his tool bag off the front porch. The Gladstone bag was filled with electronic equipment related to his core trade these past years: surveillance devices, bugs and tools to detect bugs. His cameras and recorders.

Down the street was the corner bakery that wafted the smell of bread into his bedroom every night. Beside the bakery was the parked car.

Not what he expected. The peach-coloured VC Commodore was the 1981 model, and although only a couple of years old, it already looked tired.

Swann walked a lap of the Commodore, hoping it'd look better from a different angle. It was a fleet vehicle, sure enough, but the duco chips around the fenders meant it had driven the stone roads of the outback, and the egg-crate grillwork at the front was hatched and holed. The bonnet antenna was rusty and bent. The badging on the boot was missing. The petrol tank cover was scratched and prised away, where someone had forced it open. The tyres were nearly bald.

None of this would matter, except for the reputation of the 1.9 litre model as gutless – two cylinders sawn away from the regular six – the motoring equivalent of riding a heavily laden three-legged horse.

Swann opened the door and tossed in his tools, and sat behind

the wheel. He adjusted the sun visor and turned the key, settled his shoulders into the nylon cream, waited for the engine to take. The radio was tuned to talkback, John K. Watts riffing on the need for a national footy competition, and a representative WA team. Swann had served with Watts back when he was a copper and footy player, before he reinvented himself as a comic.

Swann had gone the more traditional route – copper to security agent – or what most people knew as a private investigator.

Swann killed the radio so that he could listen to the engine, which was at least in tune. Except that the fuel gauge was ticking empty, and the battery light was flashing.

He turned the radio on and punched the board with a finger. A man was singing about a car. The tune was familiar from one of Blonny's tapes ...

*Here in my car, I feel safest of all ...*

Swann laughed. His last car, his beloved 1962 EK Holden, had been blown up by Gus Riley's bikies, back in '79, not twenty metres from where he sat.

Swann tilted the rear-vision mirror and made sure the street was clear behind him.

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The freeway into the city droned in the morning heat, the Swan River buffed to a glossy sheen. Pelicans sat on the pylons of the old Como jetty, and shags dozed on the bones of a limestone reef. Some of the cormorants looked like morose old men, others like skinny black angels.

Swann lit a cigarette, the Commodore struggling along in the lane closest to the foreshore. The polymer box in his pocket began to beep loudly. Then a phone began to ring. With his left hand, he lifted the lid off the centre console. Inside was a plastic phone, straight out of *Get Smart*. He hoisted the receiver.

'Swann? The pager working?'

Swann held up the black box and read the digital display – a seven-digit number.

'Yep.'

'Means you're in or near the city. Thing's got a five-kilometre wireless radius,' said Heenan. 'Bugger going to your office. We need you to clear

the office and meeting rooms at Parliament House. A pass is waiting for you at the door. That all needs to be done before the morning presser ...'

'Presser?'

'Press conference.'

'At your service.'

The Commodore ground its way across the freeway lanes to the West Perth exit, the limestone face of Mt Eliza at his shoulder.

'This phone – I can call anywhere with it?'

'Anywhere metro. No STD.'

The self-importance in Heenan's voice – clearly enjoying being the premier's big man, as well as bag man. Swann cut him off. 'I'm hanging up ...'

'Oh really, why?'

'I'm there.'

### 3.

Des Foley leaned between the front seats and placed his hands on the shoulders of both men. Five hundred kilometres into his ride they were all great mates. The bush weed that Cameron, in the passenger seat, kept stuffing into a clay pipe and passing around, had rippled the bush with a golden light and deep watery texture, made the car feel like it was floating over the blacktop. But it was the sulphate in the bag on the driver's lap that really had Des flying. It was good stuff, and the bag seemed bottomless, despite Reggie's dipping his finger in every five minutes and rubbing it around his gums. Reggie had started taking the goey orally after his nose began to bleed. The two men had driven from Sydney without sleeping, and were nearly there. That was three nights and four days of smoking and snorting and foot-to-the-floor. The new model Mazda, which Cameron admitted they'd stolen in Dubbo, seemed up to it so far, but that burning plastic smell wasn't a good sign. Not that Cameron and Reggie noticed.

Reggie was AWOL from the army, having met Cameron in a bar in Wagga. Cameron was headed to Perth to see his three-year-old son, and the impromptu trip had seemed to Reggie like a good idea. They had picked up Des this side of Kalgoorlie, where he'd had his finger out for three hours, with no luck. They'd skidded down the hard shoulder and nearly off into the jam-tree scrub.

Des could see that they were tanked, but their being out-of-towners suited him. Des' face was well known around Perth, despite his beard and long hair.

And they were clearly in a hurry.

It was all fun and games for the first few hundred k's, until the wheat-belt receded around York and Cameron started to rant.

His three-year-old son, stolen by his fucken ex. The stolen TV on the

back seat was for him. Cameron was going to shower and shave and sleep it off, then visit him, take the little fella the TV, say sorry for scaring him that last time.

But the closer they got to Perth the more agitated Cameron became. There was no talk now of sleeping it off. *He was going straight over. If she didn't let him in, that TV was going through the fucken window, and he was goin' in after it. Where the fuck in Perth was Thornlie?*

Des kept his mouth shut.

*That fucken bitch. That freckle-faced moll. If she says a fucken word. Thinks she's smarter than me. But I've tracked her down. Like every time.*

Cameron began punching the dash. What he intended doing to her head. Fucken improve her looks. Little facial reconstruction. Reggie bellowing like a wounded bull, getting off on Cameron's wildness.

It was none of Des' business, he told himself, once. But not twice. He was through lying to himself.

Instead he looked down at his hands, which were clenched.

The car was swerving as Reggie laughed and battered the steering wheel. Cameron getting off on what he was gonna do to his ex, recited at the top of his lungs, so mad it had a rhythm now, a beat punctuated by his punching the dash.

This wasn't good.

Des was one of Australia's most wanted. The Good Morning Bandit. Named after his habit of entering banks through side walls and ceilings and waiting for the manager to arrive. 'Good morning' was the first thing they heard. He was out of there by the time any punters arrived. No-one ever got hurt.

The mutts in the front seats were too drug-fucked to recognise him, but any copper would ID him with a passing glance.

That wouldn't do.

He wasn't going back to jail. He was polite to civilians but would shoot any copper who looked twice. And he was *never* going back to jail.

His only mantra.

Wanted in four states, and they all had a prison cell waiting for him. He'd do time in one state then they'd send him along to the next. He'd never get out. And it wouldn't be easy time. It'd be super-max and solitary, after his last escape from Pentridge.

They were getting close now. Five kilometres ahead, Des saw the crest

of the Darling Scarp over the grey ribbon of the Great Eastern Highway, the marri and jarrah forest on either side.

It wasn't unusual to have a copper stationed before the peak, to observe the behaviour of the long-haul truckies coming home. Hundreds of tons bustling along at a hundred k's headed for a sudden forty-five degree decline. The odd truckie asleep at the wheel, or with busted brakes. One or two going off the road and taking out a whole street of brick homes the other side.

'Pull over here, Reggie. I'm home.'

Surprisingly, Reggie heard him over the noise. Des had spoken quietly but firmly. Perhaps the AWOL corporal had sensed it, trained to be hyper-vigilant.

'Thought you lived near the coast?'

Cameron ceased his pounding of the dash.

'Aren't you gonna come over with us, see my son?'

Des didn't dignify it with an answer. 'I always walk the last part home. A thing I do. Let me out at the next turn right.'

Down a winding street into John Forrest National Park.

'Keep going. Here.'

Des got out and hoisted his duffel bag, leant it against the trunk of a giant marri, white flowers scattered in the dust at his feet.

He heard the driver and passenger doors open, as he knew they would. The view from the little carpark on the western edge of the scarp was always a treat; the city of Perth sprawled across the vast sandplain, the wide blue dome of the Indian Ocean curved across the horizon beyond, but the two travellers weren't getting out to appreciate the view.

Cameron and Reggie were a long way from home. Stealing the car and driving west was a spur-of-the-moment decision. They'd driven off from the last two servos without paying. They were living off the land.

Des closed his hand around the cool, cracked butt of the Browning pistol in his duffel bag and turned, kept it concealed. Like a game of statues the two men froze, tried to relax their hunter's posture into something more deceptive, rictus grins on their dials and hands on hips and arms folded.

Des took a deep breath and turned to look at the view. Wanted to know if he still had it – that radar he'd learnt in the borstals as a kid, and had honed in all of the prisons since.

He sensed Reggie come at him from behind and sidestepped and clocked him with the butt of the Browning and allowed the man's momentum to carry him over the edge of the granite cliff face, down into the nothing.

That felt good. Good enough to put a round in the breech of the pistol and, before Cameron had a chance to wipe that mincing look of shock, Des had crossed the distance between them and kicked out his legs. Des knelt on Cameron's back, so that he was facing the man's feet.

'You know, mate, you remind me of my father. My mother raised me up on *her* own, and my brothers too. She kept my father out of it, until we were old enough to keep him out of it. He was a nasty cunt, just like you ...'

Cameron was getting his breath back, starting to struggle.

'You won't be visiting your son, Cameron. And you won't be putting no TV through your ex's window. No more hidings for her.'

Des put the Browning against the back of the man's trouser leg, behind the kneecap, put in a bullet. The dirt absorbed most of the blunt force, the shattered bone and the brute sonic shock, and the forest drank up Cameron's scream. Des put a bullet through the other kneecap and stood. Took up the man's hands and ignoring his screams and eyes drunk with pain dragged him over to the cliff face and kicked him off the edge. Heard the branches in the taller marri crash and break as he fell towards the granite below.

'Give yer mate a kiss goodbye.'

It was a start. Think of it as training. He looked over the city, river curling like a lazy snake through his hometown. His mother was down there, getting ready to be put onto the street. That wasn't going to happen.

He'd burn the city to the ground.