

1

Wednesday, October 8th, 2008. Late morning.

Katanning, Western Australia.

The way the body was lying, it was obvious she hadn't seen it coming. The limbs were splayed at a grotesque angle. A pool of blood beside the head had dried in the sun before it could make it the few centimetres to the side of the road. Blowflies hovered impatiently. The October sun was high and unseasonably nasty. Anybody with any sense was sitting under the shade of the only tree for miles. Or they were somewhere else.

The sergeant was crouched beside the rapidly ripening corpse, talking into a small digital recorder. Cato Kwong squinted at the sergeant and took a swig of lukewarm water from a bottle that felt like it was melting in his hands. On his iPod, *La Bohème* was reaching a screeching crescendo. He turned it off and removed the earphones. He checked his watch: still only midmorning.

Time seemed to move so slowly these days. The sergeant's name was Jim Buckley: he chattered to himself, loving every minute, every detail of the task at hand. For a big bloke his movements were graceful. Pavarotti in a butcher's apron.

'Bullet number one entered just behind the left ear and exited through the right cheek; bullet number two entered the left eye. No apparent signs of an exit wound so we presume bullet number two is still lodged inside. I now intend to conduct an on-the-spot autopsy to confirm. Recording suspended at ... 10.22 a.m. Detective Sergeant James Buckley.'

Buckley reached over and opened his toolbox. He pulled out a handsaw.

That's one big difference between Homicide Squad and Stock Squad, Cato mused, you don't have to wait for the autopsy, just

do it yourself. He was still getting used to the idea: Detective Senior Constable Philip Kwong–Stock Squad. Homicide Squad, Major Crime, even Gangs, they had a ring to them that made you puff out your chest and stand a bit taller. Stock Squad? They were there to deal with cattle duffers, sheep theft, stolen tractors. They were touted as industry experts, they knew the farmers, knew the lingo. In Cato’s view they were washed-up has-beens recycled as detectives. Mutton dressed as lamb? The Laughing Stock Squad. *So if you come across a suspicious cow will you take it back to the station and grill it? Or leave it to stew?*

So far Cato felt like little more than a glorified agricultural inspector. Stock Squad. It kind of escaped from the corner of your mouth like a coward’s curse. Coward’s curse pretty well summed up his situation. He was here because he’d been hung out to dry by a bunch of cowards he’d once worshipped and he couldn’t do anything about it because of the Code, the Brotherhood, the whatever other bullshit name that might conceal a multitude of sins.

The Stock Squad was on tour: hearts and minds. The other two members of the squad taking the high road to the north, Cato Kwong and Jim Buckley on the low road south. A week of ‘intelligence gathering’ was how Buckley saw it: pressing the flesh, nosing around, random checks and a healthy per-diem budget—it would keep them in piss until they got back to Perth. A week of chewing straw, swatting flies and nodding sagely at stuff he didn’t give a rat’s arse about was how Cato saw it.

Cato Kwong: Stock Squad. Cato, like Peter Sellers’ Chinese butler and martial arts sparring partner in *The Pink Panther*. A nickname inflicted on him at police academy. Cato hadn’t seen any of the movies so he’d rented the videos to see what they were getting at. Cato, the manic manservant? Cato, the loyal punch-bag? Or just simply Cato the Chinaman?

The beginning of day three and Cato felt like he’d been on the road for a month.

‘Oi, Kwongie, you gonna give us a hand, mate?’

Jim Buckley was already red-faced with effort as he saw bit into the back of the cow’s neck. Blood spurting, blowflies going berko,

PRIME CUT

he was in hog heaven. Cato winced primly; he preferred his meat plastic-wrapped and barcoded.

‘Jim. Sir. Sarge ...’

Cato still didn’t know how to address Jim Buckley. It wasn’t that he didn’t have any respect for authority, it was just that he was still working on it in Jim Buckley’s case.

‘Look, do we really need to do all this stuff? It’s pretty obvious. The cow was run over, finished off with a couple of bullets to the head. The back leg was chopped off with a chainsaw and taken home to the barbie. End of story.’

Cato took another swig of the mountain spring water. He didn’t function well in excessive heat. Maybe he should join the Canadian Mounties, or the Tasmanian ones, somewhere nice and cool.

Jim Buckley frowned, a tad disappointed with the younger man’s attitude. ‘It’s still a crime, Cato mate. And it’s our job to find the bad guys.’

Cato knew he was banging his head against the proverbial. Buckley, after twenty-five years in the force, had finally found his niche. Stock Squad was Jim’s domain and he was in no mood for negativity. He mopped a sodden brow with a wipe of his shirtsleeve and passed the blood-soaked implement to Cato.

‘So, as your senior officer, I’d advise you to shut the fuck up and start sawing.’

2

Four hours earlier.
Wednesday, October 8th. Dawn.
Hopetoun, Western Australia.

Her lungs were bursting and her left hip was agony: two kilometres from home and four behind her. For the last twenty minutes she'd been feeling a bit old, worn out. Too many twinges these days and getting harder to keep them at bay. But then she rounded the corner, hit the top of the sand dune and there was the ocean. Beautiful, she thought, gorgeous. A slight breeze rippled the surface and the sun was just coming up, dispelling the shadows on the hills in the national park over to the west. The huge open sky was striped orange, pink, purple, and blue.

And would you believe it, dolphins, two of them, splashing in the shallows near the groyne. She semi-sprinted the last two hundred metres along the sand where it was packed hard at the water's edge, never taking her eyes off the dolphins. As she drew nearer something changed. The way those dolphins were moving, the shape of the fins, the frolicking and splashing; no, it wasn't splashing—it was more like thrashing. Sharks. And there was something in the water with them, something brown, floppy, lifeless. A seal maybe, from the colony on the rock a few hundred metres out from the groyne. She quickened her step. This would be something a bit special to share with her primary class in news today.

One of the sharks seemed to be shaking the seal in its jaws, like a puppy with an old sock. Finally it let go and the seal flew a few feet through the air, landing with a soft plop at the water's edge. From five metres away she could see they'd ripped the poor little bugger to shreds; just one flipper remained and the thing didn't seem to have a head. She was right on top of the carcass now. She stopped, caught her breath, shivered. It wasn't a seal; it was a human torso.

PRIME CUT

It wasn't a flipper; it was an arm—a left arm, no hand. She'd been right about the head though—there wasn't one.

She bowed forward, hands on knees, and threw up. Behind her she could hear the sharks still splashing in the shallows like a couple of dolphins, playfully taking the piss.

Hot flush. Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire put down her coffee, opened her jacket and cracked a car window. The smell of rotting roadkill nearby forced her to shut it again, quickly. Tess swore and flicked on the air conditioning. Six-twenty on a sharp, spring south-coast morning and she was sweating like a pig. Suddenly cold again, she flicked the air conditioner back off. She felt completely out of sorts. How could she be getting hot flushes when she'd only just turned forty-two? Tess looked at herself in the rear-view. The short-cropped blonde hair was losing its fight against the wispy greys. She kept on threatening to let it grow out to all-over grey. It was natural. What's so bad about grey anyway? She tried to think of some attractive, well-known, grey-haired women. She couldn't get beyond Germaine Greer. Tess added hair dye to her mental shopping list and turned the radio on.

The interviewer sounded young enough to be her daughter. She'd countried her voice up a bit, talking with an authoritative twang to a primary commodities broker about the grain and wool prices. Apparently one was up and the other was down, in contrast to the stock market in general which was still in freefall. Tess couldn't get her head around how a handful of venal mortgage-brokers in America could trigger what seemed to be a global financial tsunami and the end of the world as we know it. Never mind, it was unlikely to hit them here in Hopetoun—the end of the world and proud of it. This was Tess's first posting since she came off sick leave. Nine months. Most of the first month in hospital and out-patients, the next three in physio, the rest in therapy. She wondered how Melissa would go: new to town, year nine in high school, sharing a classroom with a bunch of teenage hard-cases whose dads had come down to work at the new mine. She'd seen them

hanging around the park—the kids, not the dads. Testosterone. The pushing and shoving, swearing and shouting: youthful high spirits, some called it. Only these days it sent her into cold sweats and panic attacks, fighting for breath, tears welling up. Even now, just at the thought of them.

A new life, a new start, new hope in Hopetoun, they'd promised her. The place hadn't warranted a permanent police post in the past. For decades it had been a laid-back holiday or retirement spot for wheatbelt farmers. There was nothing to police except maybe the occasional drunk driver or domestic. Now, with the nearby nickel mine, the population had steadily grown from a stable four hundred in the old days to a whopping two thousand—and rising. It would still be a while before it was Gotham City but with more houses, plenty of money being tossed around and the pub getting busier it meant more bad behaviour, temptation, vandalism, domestics and drugs. Hopetoun was a good place to put ageing or wounded or useless cops out to pasture. Tess ticked all three boxes. At first she'd turned it down. Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire—the bump up to 'Senior' was a reward for getting the shit kicked out of her—wanted to tough it out. But after a few weeks at a desk in Perth HQ with the concerned but embarrassed stares, the traffic, the noise and the crowds, Tess was sold on the sea change. Hopetoun. No crime to speak of, she reasoned, no stress, just sunshine and sea breezes to clear out the cobwebs.

First she heard him. Then she smelled him. Then she saw him: weaving down the road, screeching and roaring, the acrid stench of burning rubber from the smoking tyres. Tess checked the clock on her dashboard: he was right on time. She had parked the paddy wagon by the turn-off to the mine. The swirling black tyre marks at the junction were a testament to his earlier handiwork. They were the kind of marks you'd see on any road in any Australian suburb these days but the big nobs of the Shire wanted an end to it. It was rampant hoonism, it created a bad impression, it was a bloody disgrace. And it was Tess Maguire's job to nip it in the bud. Tess started up her motor, switched on the flashing lights and swung across the road blocking his path. He stopped. She tapped

on his window until he opened it.

‘Having fun, Kane?’

Kane Stevenson, Doughnut King: a drongo kid from a drongo family. There was a time Tess might have avoided pinning labels on to people. Give them a chance, that kind of thing. Not any more. Drongo is as drongo does. But what the Shire bigwigs might find hard to swallow was the fact that this particular drongo was a local boy, born and bred. They couldn’t blame this on miners, outsiders or incomers; Kane was home-grown trouble. Now that he was working at the mine, he had money to burn along with those tyres.

He wound down his window, all innocent. ‘Morning Tess, early start?’

‘Sergeant, or Officer, to you. What do you think you’re doing?’

‘Sorry mate, had to swerve. Roo on the road, I couldn’t kill it, animal lover me.’

‘Right.’

‘No: straight up.’

Tess stepped back and made a show of admiring what she saw.

‘Company ute, nice. Been promoted, Kane?’

He slapped the steering wheel proudly. ‘Yeah, Team Leader; extra fifteen grand.’

‘Congratulations. Thing is, Kane, under our lovely new hoon laws, I’ve got every right to impound this vehicle.’ She snapped her fingers. ‘Gone in sixty seconds. I don’t think your employers are going to be too impressed.’

His employers being Western Minerals, one of the biggest and richest companies in the world with mines in all corners of the globe. They paid their employees extremely well but were very unforgiving of transgressions. Their motto: Zero Tolerance. Everybody assumed they were talking about bad behaviour.

‘Ah fuck, Tess, c’mon,’ Kane pleaded, for the first time a flicker of recognition of consequences in his big brown eyes.

Tess’s mobile trilled: caller ID, Greg, her offsider.

‘Tess? You’d better get back to town. There’s been a body.’

She squinted menacingly at the Doughnut King. ‘First and last

warning,' and took off in the paddy wagon, burning a bit of rubber on the way.

As the sky brightened, Tess passed a convoy of white utes heading in the opposite direction out to the mine, forty kilometres away. On the outskirts of town she climbed the low hill to the roundabout leading off to the light industrial on one side and the new sprawling off-the-peg Legoland housing estate on the other. Cresting the rise she relaxed a notch or two at the view down the main street to the bright blue Southern Ocean at the bottom of the hill. After three months she still hadn't got over how small, quiet and, yes, beautiful the place was. And she hoped she never would.

Tess pulled into the beachside gravel car park. Her colleague, Constable Greg Fisher, was on the beach talking to a middle-aged woman dressed in running gear, while the town GP crouched examining something on the sand; it was hidden from view by a makeshift canvas windbreak. Greg's initiative: he was in his first year out of police academy and eager to impress. Tess had long forgotten that feeling. A pair of pied oystercatchers pecked the sand irritably with scarlet stiletto beaks. A small handful of early-rising onlookers strained to get a glimpse of the body, careful not to overstep the invisible line established by Constable Fisher.

As she got closer, Tess recognised the woman as a teacher from the primary school: she'd seen her around, hard not to in a town this small. The teacher was a bit green around the gills; her eyes were puffy, her lower lip trembled as she talked, Greg taking notes. Tess left them to it and walked, white sand squeaking beneath her feet, over to the doctor and the body. The torso glistened in the morning sun; green tendrils of seaweed sparkled on the mottled, lightly tanned flesh. There was no head, no legs, only part of one arm and a pale grey mush where the missing pieces should have been.

The doctor stood up, broad-shouldered, early fifties. Tess had met him once before, a few weeks back when she dropped in a young miner who'd been on a bender and tried to punch out the

PRIME CUT

pub ATM when it argued with him about his PIN number.

‘What’s the word, Doctor Terhorst?’

‘Well he’s dead, that’s for sure.’ His lip curled slightly at his little joke, then he continued in his clipped Afrikaans accent. ‘But at this stage I can’t accurately say what age bracket or even, for sure, what race. From the torso length I’d estimate medium height, medium build. Don’t ask me for a time of death, with something that’s been in the water it’s too hard without the proper tests. Ball park? Less than a week.’

‘Shark attack?’ Hopetoun. Southern Ocean. Not an unreasonable question.

‘Well I’ve seen a few of these back in Cape Town and the injuries are consistent with sharks.’

Tess pointed to the mush at the base of the spine where the legs were meant to start. ‘Looks like they bit clean through him.’

The doctor nodded grimly then scratched his chin. ‘Possibly. I’d be more worried about the sever wound at the neck.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s very neat compared to the punctures and tears everywhere else. The spinal column looks like it’s been sheared with a clean straight edge. Either our shark had meticulous table manners ... or somebody cut this poor man’s head off.’

3

Wednesday, October 8th. Midmorning.
Busselton, Western Australia.

The floorboard creaks under Stuart Miller's size tens. The passageway seems shorter than he remembers it and that bitter ashtray smell is back in his nostrils. The lights are out, another power cut, bloody miners on strike again. So why can he hear the telly on the other side of the door? A football match. He turns the handle and steps into the dim room lit only by the flickering TV screen: a sea of red and white rolling and roaring. Jenny and Graeme are on the settee, cuddled up, watching the game. On the floor, Graeme's Scalextric cars race around the track giving off sparks at each corner.

'Home, pet, what you got the lights out for?'

His hand goes to the light switch but nothing happens.

'Shite, the bulb must have gone. What's the score?' he nods at the TV.

'Nil all,' says little Graeme, finally acknowledging his dad's presence. Jenny must be in a huff about something: him working late again probably. She hasn't moved or said a word. Miller looks at the screen again, the Cup Final, Sunderland and Leeds. Billy Hughes steps up for the corner, the ball lands for Porterfield. He's seen this before: the goal, the setting. That's when the panic kicks in. He touches his wife's shoulder and head, and his fingers come away sticky with blood. Graeme is nestled into her, hand resting on her knee, a deep crimson gash above his ear.

Stuart Miller jerked awake gasping for breath. The bed was empty and Jenny was gone.

4

Wednesday, October 8th. Late morning.

Sergeant Jim Buckley was heaving, puffing and fit to have a coronary. His normally flushed drinker's face was nearly purple and his ginger-grey sideburns glistened with sweat. The cow's head was now separated from the body after a joint effort by himself, Cato and three hacksaw blades. Its neck was flat to the ground and the eyes were staring skywards to cow heaven. Buckley had a foot planted firmly on either side of the head, pinning the ears to the ground. With his left hand pushing down hard on the nose for extra leverage, he gave one last mighty tug with the right. His hand emerged triumphant from the cow's face, pliers gripping a small blood-soaked lump of metal.

'A twenty-two, just as I thought.'

Cato finished pissing against a ghost gum and zipped back up. He had retired to the shade and was halfway through today's cryptic from the *West*. He'd managed to snaffle it from the neighbouring breakfast table at the Katanning Motel. It had been a close shave though, the guy had only gone to the toilet and when he came back for his paper Cato had to plead ignorance and suggest that the breakfast lady had cleared it away. Buckley had shaken his head in disgust.

'Why don't you ever buy your own, they're only a dollar, you tight-arsed bastard.'

'Dollar thirty. All I need is the crossword, I don't need to read all the other crap.'

His father had taught him how to crack the cryptic codes a couple of years ago and now he was hooked. There was something about the search for clear reasoning among the insane ramblings, and identifying the cold calculation behind the crafty wordplay. It came in useful in the interview room sometimes. Dad meanwhile

had moved on to Sudokus to enrich his widowed dotage; he'd knock them off in ten minutes if his hands weren't shaking too much. He'd tried to get Cato onto it, reckoned the process of patient, logical elimination would be good for training his detective brain. Cato was sticking with the cryptics; intuition, flights of fancy, twisted logic and inspiration backed up later by the facts—that was more his style.

Merit Cup for perfect roast.

Cup, roast, something to do with coffee? The heat was curdling his brain. Cato stretched out his long legs and smiled encouragingly.

'Good work, Sarge. Any idea whose gun it came from?'

Jim Buckley's good mood had withered in the heat.

'Get fucked. Bag this evidence while I clean up.'

'What, the head as well?'

'In the esky; sooner it's on ice the better.'

'No worries,' Cato sighed. He wondered if he should resign now or after next payday. That was the intention after all: disgraced, demoted, demeaned, despised—until he had taken enough and went of his own accord. They wouldn't sack him; he knew too much. But they certainly had their ways.

Cato grabbed a Ziploc bag out of the Land Cruiser glove box, hauled the esky off the back seat, and kick-closed the car door, planting his heel dead centre of the bull's-head logo. He popped the bullet in the bag and crammed the head into the esky. A mobile buzzed in his trousers. It took Cato by surprise; he hadn't expected a signal out here.

'That you, Cato?'

'Detective Senior Constable Kwong speaking, who's this?'

'Hutchens.'

DI Mick Hutchens, his old boss from Fremantle Detectives. Now with Albany Detectives, enjoying a south-coast sea change in Bogan Town. He'd fared better in the fallout than Cato had.

'What can I do for you, sir?'

'Cut the crap, it's me, Mick. Where are you?'

Cato looked around at the parched, blistered landscape.

'Somewhere near Katanning.'

PRIME CUT

Hutchens chuckled. ‘Enjoying life with the Sheep-Shagging Squad then?’

‘Not sure the Commissioner would appreciate your cynical tone, sir.’

‘Right. That fuckwit Buckley with you?’

‘Want a word with him?’

‘No. Listen up. Got some real work for you. A body, well, half a one anyway. Human though; would make a nice change for you.’

Cato’s pulse quickened like it hadn’t done for a long time.

‘Where is it?’

‘Down in Hopetoun; maybe three hours drive for you.’

Cato racked his brain—Hopetoun, south coast, fishing spot? Other than that, the place meant nothing to him.

‘Why aren’t your mob onto it? I’m supposed to be banished to Siberia, remember?’

A momentary uncomfortable silence, then Hutchens cleared his throat.

‘Three are on suspension, two on sick leave, two on holiday. I’m scraping the bottom of the barrel. Thought of you immediately.’

‘Cheers.’

The faintest whining hint of desperation crept into Hutchens’ voice. ‘Cato mate, I need you. For the next few days anyway.’

Cato couldn’t shake the thought that there was more to this than met the eye. Was Hutchens really scraping the very bottom of the barrel before he thought of his old mate Cato? The sun scorched the back of his neck, flies worried his face, and the headless three-legged cow was starting to smell really bad. The road out of Katanning shimmered in the heat haze. Who was Cato Kwong to look a gift horse in the mouth?

‘Tell me more.’

‘Washed up this morning. Looks like a shark attack but the local doctor reckons our bloke might have been dead before he hit the water. He’s a country quack so probably talking through his arse.’ Same old Mick Hutchens, thought Cato, Zen master of the sweeping generalisation. ‘I need you to take a look, confirm or deny. No hassle, no fuss. Fill out the paperwork and file it, Cato. Home by Friday.’

Cato had lost track of time—then he remembered, today was Wednesday. If it really *was* that simple and clean-cut he'd still be home in time for the weekend. It was his turn to have Jake. They could have a family weekend together, just the two of them. Yeah right.

'Who's the officer-in-charge down there?'

'Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire ...' Hutchens paused, no doubt for effect. Cato didn't miss a beat, didn't give Hutchens the reaction he wanted.

'Taser Tess?'

'The very same.'

After her ordeal at the hands of the mob up north, the Commissioner had made taser stun guns standard issue for all officers in the optimistic belief that the outcome might have been different had she been 'suitably equipped' with a fifty-thousand-volt zapper. Cato had his doubts about their effectiveness in that kind of situation, particularly if they fell into the wrong hands. Scepticism aside, it had made Tess something of a folk hero among her colleagues right around the state. She had been more than that to him, once.

'I thought she'd left the job.'

'Sent to Hopetoun. Same thing. Look, take Buckley with you to make up the numbers but mate ... keep him away from those sheep.'

Hutchens signed off with a 'baaaaaah'. Cato sighed and snapped his phone shut. Then it came to him, *Merit Cup for perfect roast*.

Merit Cup: an anagram, 'Prime Cut'. It was enough to turn a good man vegetarian.

Jim Buckley was hunched over by the wing mirror, mouth pursed, using a Kleenex baby wipe to try to get the bloodstains off his Stock Squad shirt. Cato coughed politely for attention.

'Sarge. Something just came up.'

They should have been in Hopetoun by early afternoon but Jim Buckley had insisted on backtracking to put the cow's head into storage in the freezer at the Katanning cop shop. The local boys

PRIME CUT

weren't happy. They'd have to find somewhere else to store the snags and steaks meant for this Friday's sundowner barbie.

'Use some initiative,' Buckley had snapped at them, rather ungratefully.

Then they'd stopped along the way for a late lunch: two meat pies, a Mars Bar and a Coke for Buckley; for Cato just the one pie, a floury bruised apple and an orange juice, having caught sight of himself in a window and seen what just half a week on the road can do. Then there were the four smokos and two piss stops. Then they'd pulled up a couple of speeders and issued tickets, Buckley getting his stats up, Cato getting his blood pressure up. He was impatient to get to the body. He wondered if Buckley ever felt the thrill of stuff like this—a possible case, a mystery: was the body dead before it went into the water? That kind of thing. Probably not. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror—flecks of grey at the temples but, at two months short of thirty-eight, he was in as good a shape as he had been for years. The banishment to Stock Squad left him with extra time on his hands and he used some of it to get fitter. Swimming, cycling, and avoiding the kind of junk he'd eaten when he was doing normal cop hours—whatever they were.

Recently Cato didn't seem to be able to get enough sleep. There was a time when he buzzed along on four or five hours. Nowadays he usually got the full eight, often more, but still sometimes woke up exhausted and lethargic. Today? Today he saw a flicker of energy in his eyes that he hadn't seen for a long time.

It was midafternoon by the time they crested the rise that would drop them down into Hopetoun. The suffocating heat of the interior had eased as they neared the coast. The hot easterly had become a fresh south-westerly and Cato was beginning to feel halfway human again. As they rolled down the Hopetoun main drag—Veal Street it was called—Cato reflected they were having a big meat-themed day. Cows' heads, gift horses, barbies, pies, even the crossword solution. And now Veal Street; that's life in the Stock Squad.

Two telephone boxes stood outside a cafe where a handful of people drank coffee on a pine deck. In one of the booths was a man

with his back to them, wearing dusty blue and fluoro-yellow work overalls and holding one hand over his free ear trying to block out the wind noise. He turned to face them and Cato saw that he was Chinese. Their eyes met for a moment as Cato rolled past.

‘More than just the one of you in town then,’ Buckley observed.

Cato continued looking at the man through his rear-vision mirror.

‘Well spotted. That must be why you’re the sergeant and I’m a mere constable.’

‘*Senior* constable: don’t put yourself down, mate,’ Buckley corrected him.

Cato had phoned ahead and got through to Hopetoun second-in-command, Constable Greg Fisher. Greg told him to meet them at the Sea Rescue hut beside the skate park. He had forewarned them: the hut was the cop shop until the new whiz-bang multipurpose emergency services building was finished. It might take a while, he’d said, ‘chronic labour shortage’. From what Cato could see—a big pile of sand inside a temporary wire fence—there was little evidence the new cop shop had even been started. He pulled up onto the rust-coloured gravel. The Sea Rescue hut was a faded and peeling olive green and about the size of a shipping container—but not quite as pleasing to the eye. The door was open so Cato walked in. Greg Fisher was sitting at a desk talking on the phone. He looked up and acknowledged the visitors with a wink. Senior Sergeant Tess Maguire stood by a recently cleaned whiteboard, the smell of cleaning fluid hung in the air. She had a red marker pen in her left hand and Cato noticed her bare ring finger. In the centre of the whiteboard she’d given the body a name, ‘Flipper’, and drawn a question mark beside it. Over to the right-hand side, a short list of names and telephone numbers.

She turned. At first glance she still looked the same Tess to Cato but, on closer inspection, her eyes seemed darker and sadder. She was using them to measure him up too. Cato sucked his stomach in a little bit and lifted his head to give his neck more of a chance but Tess seemed to be more focused on the bull’s-head logo on his Stock Squad breast pocket. Cato winced inside; he really needed to

PRIME CUT

change back into civvies at the first opportunity.

‘Nice uniform; heard you were coming to town.’ The light seemed to have gone out of her voice as well. ‘How’s things?’ she inquired idly, like the answer didn’t matter.

‘Good. Good.’ He said it twice as if to reassure himself.

Cato introduced Buckley who was, after all, the senior officer. Tess filled them in on what little she knew: teacher, sharks, torso, doctor, head (lack of).

‘Why Flipper?’ Cato nodded towards the whiteboard.

Greg Fisher failed to smother a grin. ‘The teacher who found him thought it was a seal at first, thought the arm was a flipper.’

‘Do you get many people dropping in here?’

Cato could see Tess bristling.

‘There’ll be a room divider up by tomorrow,’ she said. ‘No member of the public will see the board.’

Cato wondered how you could divide such a small space any further. Callous nicknames aside, as the days went by there would be plenty of other reasons why the information board would need to be blocked from public view.

‘So tell me about the doctor’s take on this.’

Jim Buckley clearly thought it was about time he asserted his presence. ‘Yeah, has he been watching a bit too much telly, or what?’

Tess summed up what she’d been told, finishing with the news that the body had been carted up to Ravensthorpe, fifty kilometres away, and put into cold storage in the hospital there.

Cato swore. They’d had to come through Ravensthorpe to get to Hopetoun; he could have checked out the body on his way through – if somebody had bothered to let him know. Now they’d have to waste time backtracking. Greg looked uncomfortable. Cato could see that Tess didn’t give a hoot: this was her patch, her rules.

‘A pathologist is coming over from Albany; he should be at Ravensthorpe in a few hours. You can meet him there. Anything else you want to do while you’re waiting?’

She had addressed the question to Buckley, letting Cato know

who was boss. Buckley looked over at Cato. Detective Kwong took his sunnies out of his Stock Squad shirt pocket.

‘Let’s go to the beach.’

The beach at Hopey didn’t offer any major new insights but Cato enjoyed the squeak of the brilliant white grains under his Stock Squad blundies and the sparkling clarity of the water rolling and crashing onto the shore. For him it was as much about getting a feel for the place, the lie of the land and all that. First impressions? Small. The tour of the town had taken about five minutes; there seemed to be about half a dozen streets either side of the main drag. East of Veal Street were mainly older holiday shacks; to the west, the newly built Legoland – as Tess called it – courtesy of the mine. At the south end of Veal Street, the town centre – three shops, a couple of cafes, a park, a pub, the beach, the ocean. At the north end, Veal Street became the Hopetoun–Ravensthorpe Road. Hopetoun was the original one-horse town and, at first glance, a beautiful and peaceful place to die.

Cato had asked Tess and Greg to find out tide and weather conditions for the last few days to see if that would tell them where the body might have entered the water. He also suggested following up any missing person reports from the last few weeks or so. Tess had given him a ‘No shit, Sherlock?’ look. Obviously, in both instances, she was already on the case. Cato should have expected the hostility from her but it still bothered him. It was at least twelve or thirteen years ago but it was clearly a sore that had never properly healed. And why should it? Cato was fairly fresh out of the academy and four years her junior. They had been partnered up, working nights out of Midland, Perth’s bandit country, in the souped-up unmarked Commodore. Cato Kwong – Prince of the Mean Streets. High-speed chases through the suburbs, domestics, prowlers, break-ins. Routine stuff but still usually more a thrill than not in those days. And the adrenaline had fed the spark between them. It all seemed natural and inevitable and it was good, great at times. All over each other like a rash. Until he walked out on her.

PRIME CUT

It was nearly dark as they drove into Ravensthorpe. Just a few pale strips of sky lay in the west, sandwiched between the silhouette of distant hills and a blanket of ink-black clouds. Ravy, as it was known locally, was bigger than Hopey, only just. The main street was dark and deserted except around the two-storey red brick Ravensthorpe Hotel where an array of utes and four-wheel drives were angle-parked in anticipation of the Wednesday night pool competition. Some of the utes bore mine company logos. Cato had seen the lights of the mine off in the eastern distance as they passed the airport turn-off halfway between the two towns. You couldn't miss it, a patch of brilliant daylight in the surrounding dim dusk. They'd had to pull into the side of the road while an ambulance, with lights flashing, sped past.

Cato pulled into the hospital car park and killed the radio. According to the eight o'clock news the Australian stock market just had its worst day in twenty years. Jim Buckley snorted and muttered something to the effect of 'Boo-fucking-hoo'. It was deadly quiet, not many lights on. Like many country hospitals, Ravensthorpe was little more than a glorified nursing post, kept open by the skin of its teeth, the marginality of the electorate or, as in this case, the persuasive power of the mining company. The ambulance, having deposited its patient, was swinging back out onto the road; the driver and Cato exchanged a relaxed hand-flick wave.

Cato and Buckley approached the front entrance expecting the automatic doors to slide open. They didn't. Except for emergencies, the hospital operating hours had recently been cut back to an eight to eight shift. 'Staff Shortages' said the handwritten notice bluetacked to the door. It was 8.05. Cato rang the bell and they waited. And waited. Cato cupped his hands to the door and peered through the glare for any signs of life or movement inside. Nothing. He swore loudly and pressed the bell a tenth time. Finally an elderly woman in a pink dressing gown floated into view with a cup of something steaming. She almost dropped her mug as she saw Cato's face up against the glass. He pressed his ID against the door mouthing 'POLICE'. It didn't help; in fact she seemed even more determined to hurry back to her bed and hide under the covers.

Jim Buckley stepped forward with a kindly smile, a cheery wave, and a non-Asian face. That seemed to do the trick. The old woman poked a button on the inside and the doors slid open. With a bedside manner that was a complete revelation to Cato, Buckley got directions to the operating theatre at the rear of the hospital as well as learning all he needed to know about her hernia and cataracts.

‘Thanks Deirdre, and you take care of yourself now, love.’

‘Are you coming back tomorrow, Roger?’

‘Yes love, ’course I am.’

Buckley gave her a last little wave and led Cato down the corridor. Cato wondered who was meant to be looking after Deirdre overnight when he spotted a grumpy-looking woman with angry red hair knotted up in a bun. She was coming out of the ladies. She didn’t give either of the men a second glance, as if strangers wandering the hospital corridors at this hour was an everyday occurrence. Instead she thumped through a set of double doors behind which Cato could hear muffled cries and commotion. Dear Diary, remind me to avoid needing an overnight stay in Ravensthorpe General and to never whinge about city hospitals ever again.

The lights were at least on in the operating theatre, a good sign. They pushed open the doors and walked through. A short wiry man paused, scalpel in hand. Behind him an assistant sat on a stool at a steel bench in the corner taking notes with one hand and eating a sandwich with the other. She didn’t pause or look up from behind her curtain of black hair. In the other corner stood Tess. She looked at her watch meaningfully and smiled mock-sweetly.

‘So you found the place okay.’

Cato’s patience was stretched paper-thin. ‘Had a bit of trouble getting in.’

The man with the scalpel was obviously keen to get on with it. ‘Evening gentlemen, you must be the detectives. I’m the pathologist. Harold Lewis, Harry to you. Forgive me for not shaking hands. Shall we proceed?’

All this addressed in a fey voice to Jim Buckley who nodded. His attention was elsewhere.

‘That’s Sally,’ said Harry waving his scalpel in the general direction.

It was a kind of low-rent *Silent Witness*, silent except for Sally munching on the sandwich and the scratching of her biro on a notepad. The body lay on a shiny steel table. Cato edged closer. His eyes travelled over the skin, the wounds, the stumps and the handless arm. Flipper. It didn’t look human any more. But it—correction, he—once was. This shapeless lump of meat had a family somewhere. Cato would try to hold on to that thought. The smell was like an extra presence in the room. Sally seemed oblivious to it, wiping a wholemeal crumb daintily from the corner of her lips.

Dr Lewis got to work. The subject was a medium-sized male probably in the twenty to forty age-range. No obvious indications of any disease or illness. No scars, tattoos, or distinguishing birthmarks, and no obvious indications of racial origin. ‘Going by the general slippage and flesh deterioration I’d estimate he’s been in the water for up to a week. Sorry I can’t be more precise.’

Harry examined, and Sally listed, the various wounds, mainly teeth-marks and tears. With the sandwich out of the way, Sally hopped off her stool and took some photographs.

Dr Lewis held the pale arm up, quite gently. ‘Pity about the missing hand; it might have had a wedding finger, something to help us along. No such luck.’

As far as he could tell, the missing hand, right arm, and legs were probably the work of sharks. Lewis turned his attention to the neck, dragging down the magnifier on its extension arm.

‘The neck hasn’t been snapped like you might expect from the wrenching movement of a shark’s jaw. It has been cut, or more likely sawn, perhaps with a chainsaw? A handsaw would be a lot of effort and leave more jagged markings on the bone. Not exactly my specialty but we’ll get it looked at in Perth.’

Cato certainly agreed with the ‘handsaw effort’ part. Was it only that morning they’d been decapitating a cow in Katanning?

Lewis continued. ‘So my observant friend, Dr Terhorst, would appear to be on the ball. Speaking of which, I thought he might

have been with us tonight?’

He looked around the room as if Terhorst might have been hiding somewhere.

Tess looked up from writing her own notes. ‘He was booked to give a talk at the Hopey Wine Club tonight. He gave his apologies, said he’d call you tomorrow.’

‘A wine buff too. A man of many talents, our Dr Terhorst,’ Lewis said, a touch insincerely. He made the ‘Y’ incision and opened the body up. Tess went pale. Cato made himself keep watching; it wasn’t his first time, by any means, but it had been a while. Buckley was concentrating on Sally’s calf muscles, oblivious to the carnage on the steel trolley. Lewis lifted the lungs out. Cato could see where the wiry muscularity came from. A few lung lifts every day would keep anyone in good shape.

‘The lung contents rule out death by drowning,’ Lewis confirmed.

He examined them further, probing with his scalpel, humming softly to himself. Cato tried to place the tune: it might have been a bit of Puccini, or Shirley Bassey. Finally Lewis glanced at Cato.

‘I would say your friend was definitely dead before he went into the water.’

Cato and Tess shared a look; it seemed he was going to be around for a while longer. Lewis plucked out and squeezed what appeared to be a blood-soaked semi-deflated balloon into a plastic container. Stomach contents: pretty empty, but there were indications of rice and chicken in there. Blood, skin and tissue samples would be taken for further testing but Cato had seen enough for now. His neck prickled with something approaching excitement.

‘Are you saying this is a murder, Dr Lewis?’

‘Possibly; that’s your job not mine. There could be any number of reasons for what we see here: accident, panic, cover-up, foul play. Anyway ...’ he tapped Flipper’s neck lightly with his scalpel and looked Cato straight in the eye, ‘it’s definitely a bit fishy.’