

**SHORE  
LEAVE  
DAVID  
WHISH  
WILSON**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

# 1.

A midnight easterly blew off the desert, gusting in the higher branches. Swann turned the hose onto the garden that ran alongside his shed, soaking the Hardenbergia whose purple flowers had browned in the heat. Marion was asleep in the front room beneath the ceiling fan, but he hadn't been able to drift off.

Swann aimed the hose into the clumps of wattle, woolly bush and banksia. When the plants were mature they wouldn't need watering, but another day like today and they'd be crisp as the leaves under his feet. Swann avoided squirting beneath the concrete slab where two blue-tongue lizards had taken up residence. Their saucer of water beside the nearest shrub was brimming, and he could see the heavy trace-shape of their tails in the sand.

Swann was glad that the lizards had moved in because they kept snakes away. Last year, he'd removed a metre-long tiger snake who'd occupied the same hole, attracted to the motorbike frogs in the neighbour's pond. Swann had nearly trodden on the snake after looking for a cricket ball knocked into the bushes by his nine-year-old grandson, Jock. Swann immobilised the snake's head with the tines of a garden rake and lifted it by the tail, dropping it into a hessian bag. He took it to the dunes behind South Beach and released it.

Swann put his head under the hose and soaked his hair and face. Gone midnight, and it was thirty degrees. Despite the faint moonlight and the floodlit port working through the night, the sky was a sprawl of stars. The crescent moon sat above the roofline of his fibro shack. He could see its pitted surface and the shadows formed by deeper craters. Above him was the Southern Cross and the Milky Way, like fairy floss across the western horizon.

Swann wiped a hand over his wet hair and flicked a spray of droplets into the bushes. He put his hands on his hips as another wave of nausea rose from his belly. He swallowed hard, and it passed. He was getting better at keeping it down, even if his symptoms weren't improving. The headaches were more frequent and the nausea was worse every day. He was lucky that Marion was a nurse, pushing him to get help. She didn't know what was wrong, but then again neither did his doctor, or any of the specialists he'd consulted. Swann was too sick to work but it didn't matter for now. He'd worked solidly these past years and had enough money to last a few months.

The front gate screeched on its hinges. It was Swann's early alarm system, together with the dog, who emerged from underneath the house, growling. Swann walked to the driveway. He recognised the moonlit silhouette of Kerry Bannister, dressed in her regular jumpsuit and blonde wig. Kerry was the long-term madam of the Ada Rose brothel that was a minute's walk from Swann's home.

Swann whistled to the dog, who ceased her growling. She was afraid of the dark and her relief at being called off was demonstrated by her wagging tail and running back and forth between Swann and Kerry. Swann halved the distance between them and Kerry did the same, shoulders set while lighting a cigarette, her weathered face illuminated by the streetlight.

'Couldn't sleep, eh?' she asked, thrusting out a hand for him to shake.

'Not when there's mischievous Christians afoot.'

Last week, as a favour to Kerry, Swann had installed a security camera on the back wall of the brothel, to dissuade whoever kept painting crucifixes there in fluorescent road-marking paint, which was near impossible to remove.

'I'm a witch, don't forget. Safe from their mumbo jumbo. You and Marion should join our coven sometime. Speaking of, is she asleep?'

'Sound. I don't think she'd be keen to frolic at this point.'

The smoke from Kerry's cigarette turned Swann's stomach, and he felt a convulsion in his belly. If the ripple became a wave then Kerry had better stand back.

'It was you I wanted to see. Glad I didn't have to wake you. We've got a bit of a ... hostage situation in room five. Daniel's off sick. And before you ask, the male person concerned doesn't strike me as the Christian type.'

'You call the cops? Who's he with?'

‘Montana. And no, I didn’t. Thought I’d try you first. With the Yanks coming tomorrow, I don’t want to look like I can’t manage my affairs.’

‘Is the person armed?’

‘Don’t think so. He’s just refusing to come out. Blocked the doorway with the bed.’

The Ada Rose had been open for as long as Swann could remember. It’d been a Ruby Devine brothel until her murder, when Kerry Bannister took it over. Kerry paid the right people, kept the shopfront discreet, looked after her workers and made sure men weren’t involved in the day-to-day. The brothel was a kilometre from the port and only became busy when the Yanks were in town, as they would be tomorrow.

Swann put on his jeans, boots and an old tee-shirt he could afford to have ripped, or worse. On his way to the brothel he stopped to heave behind a hedge. His stomach was empty except for the potato and leek soup that was all he could keep down. His jeans hung loose on his hips due to lost weight.

Kerry Bannister and the three other women on shift gathered in the hallway outside room five. They were all dressed in civvies – jeans, sandals and loose shirts. Kerry moved her workers through the business in three-monthly cycles, paying for them to fly in from Sydney and Melbourne, and Swann didn’t recognise two of the newest women. He nodded to Havana, who still worked a room but also filled in as manager when Kerry was away. She was a Noongar woman in her late twenties with short black hair, and Kerry’s sometime partner. Her fists were clenched and her large brown eyes were fierce with the desire to get at the man behind the door.

‘I think he’s got her gagged. She’s not sayin’ anythin’,’ Havana said when Swann knocked on the door.

‘Open the door,’ he said firmly. ‘We just need to know that ... Montana is ok.’

Swann looked to Kerry. ‘Punters in the other rooms?’

‘Nah, we closed up, soon as this happened. He came in alone. Small bloke, sunburnt face and heavily freckled. Gave his name as Ron Smith. My guess is a cockie, or a miner.’

Swann knocked again but there was no response. He tried the door but it was wedged shut. ‘Carlie, could you get what I left at the entrance?’

Swann had used Havana’s real name, and she nodded, returning with

the chainsaw cradled in her arms.

Swann took the old machine that he'd inherited from Marion's father. He hoped it'd work. It was primed with two-stroke but he had no cause to use it in his suburban backyard. The last time he'd worked the chainsaw was a few years ago when he'd gone to a friend's block outside the city, to carve firewood off a fallen jarrah.

He nodded to Kerry, who stood back as he opened the choke to full and shouted, 'I'm coming in,' then put the machine on the ground and pulled the starter cord. It caught first time, and the smell of exhaust filled the hall along with the deep chuckle of the idling motor. Swann lifted the blade and pressed go. The blade scythed the air and the motor roared. He gave it a good rev and kicked the door. Immediately the handle shuddered, and turned. The door opened a fraction, then more as the bed was dragged away. Montana fled the room, pulling panties from her mouth. The other women formed a circle around her, Carlie foremost, nodding to Swann to enter the room. Instead, Swann killed the motor, and the sound of the chainsaw died away. A small man with ginger hair and an orange moustache dressed in double-denim stared at him. Wore old KT26 trainers on his feet. He raised his hands to show they were empty. Swann stood away and let Kerry into the room. She backed the man into a corner. 'Empty yer fuckin pockets onto the bed. Every last cent. And yer wallet too. I'll be holding yer licence in case of further trouble.'

The man did as he was told. He had plenty of money: two wads of mixed notes, near three hundred dollars, which likely made him a miner. He opened his wallet and spilled cards onto the bed.

Kerry's right fist hovered beside her shoulder. She shouted behind her, 'Montana, you ok? He do anything?'

'She's alright,' Carlie answered.

The man's face was empty of expression. He didn't appear drunk. He edged around Kerry and didn't look at Swann as he passed. Kept his eyes on his feet as he sauntered past the gauntlet of jeers from Carlie and the others.

Kerry patted Swann on the bicep. 'Thanks mate.'

'Not a worry,' Swann answered. 'Where's the toilet?'

'Down the end, where it's always been. You alright? You look peaky.'

Swann hurried down the hall.

## 2.

Devon Smith wiped his hands on his US Navy coveralls and closed the lid on the industrial dishwasher, waiting to hear the churn of water. The damn thing wasn't working properly. He and Marcus had pre-washed the thousands of dishes by hand before putting them in the machine. Devon had earlier emptied the clogged drain, then crawled beneath the benchtop to check the plumbing while Marcus, who was a black six-footer, looked on with folded arms.

Marcus was like that. You'd ask him to do something hard and dirty and he'd puff his lips and shake his head. He wasn't lazy, but he also wasn't going to get his hands dirty before some white man had given it a try.

Devon Smith and Marcus were the same rank of Kitchen Patrol shitkicker. There was nothing Devon could do about Marcus because their supervisor, Lenny Arnold, was also black. Devon knew that they played cards together on the rear deck after their shifts, whereas outside of work hours Devon and Marcus lived entirely separate lives. The US Navy was supposed to be a family where the only colour that mattered was the uniform, but that wasn't how it went down. The racial politics on board the USS *Carl Vinson* were no different than back in the US, which was alright by Devon Smith.

Devon looked to the clock and saw that it was 1640. Because of the delay, fresh dishes wouldn't be ready for the dinner service unless they both hauled ass, but he needn't have worried. Marcus and Lenny began to pick up the handwashed dishes and give them a cursory wipe with a tea towel before loading them onto the trolleys destined for the mess.

Smith took a towel and went to work alongside them. It was near a hundred degrees in the kitchen and the months of sweat and heavy lifting

since the *Carl Vinson* began its tour meant that his arms were corded with muscle.

A day out from port in a white country, and Devon wanted to look his best. The only thing he knew about Australia came from the film *Crocodile Dundee*, and the excited stories of his fellow seamen from the tour a couple of years ago. Summer whites were being pressed and shoes polished. Plans were being hatched around the best places to get laid. Like every unmarried man on the aircraft carrier, Smith was looking to get his nut, but that wasn't all. A man needed a plan, his father had taught him, and he and his father had devised a strategy that would potentially see him rich enough to quit the service. This fact made it easier to stomach working alongside Lenny and Marcus, who as usual were talking too loud and belly-laughing at things that weren't even funny.

### 3.

Swann drove his Brougham into the parking space reserved for him and Gerry Tracker. On the passenger seat was the morning paper and a thermos of black tea. It'd just gone five in the afternoon and soon the neighbourhood kids would arrive.

Swann took his roll of keys and unlocked the front door. He flicked the lights and the fans. The gym smelt of foot odour, sweat and Goanna Oil, and he went directly to the roller door and cracked the lock. His illness had made him weaker, and he struggled to drive the door up through its guides. As he lifted, fresh air entered the low concrete chamber of what was known locally as Swann and Gerry's boxing gym. There were no signs out front and they hadn't advertised, but word had spread about the free gym for local kids and by six o'clock the place would be full.

The room beneath the video store didn't cost much to rent, and Swann and his friend Gerry Tracker paid it themselves. Swann and Gerry had fought as amateur boxers back in the sixties, and they had decided to start the gym a few years ago after Swann came out of hospital. The gym had begun with a couple of heavy bags and a few sets of gloves but local sports shops and the Maritime Union had donated equipment and money, and now it was crowded with light and heavy bags, weights and ropes, chin-up bars and a full boxing ring in the back corner.

Swann and Gerry Tracker took turns overseeing the nightly circuit of kids doing exercises and sparring. Tonight, Gerry's son Blake, plus a kid who Gerry was training, Lee Southern, were going to take the class. All Swann had to do was open up and watch in case any of the kids got carried away in the ring. Some of the local bouncers and a few stevedores from the port were regulars and helped where needed.

Swann checked the racks of gloves and arranged the skipping ropes

from shortest to longest. The sea breeze didn't look like it was coming in today, and he angled one of the fans towards 'Swann's Couch', which some of the Noongar kids had taken off a verge and carried down for him. It was rain damaged but didn't smell any worse than the rest of the equipment in the room. He sat on it now, unfolding his paper. He kicked off his thongs and lifted his legs onto the cushions.

After returning from the brothel, Swann had slept fitfully through the morning while Marion went off to work, only the sound of the dog's barking punctuating the silence of the suburban street. When he awoke there were three messages on the machine that he didn't bother playing. He ate a piece of toast and butter, and then a bowl of yoghurt.

Following his breakfast, Swann dressed and walked to his doctor on Hampton Road. Now in his early fifties, Swann had been a smoker since he was eleven years old. Swann's GP had organised a chest X-ray at Fremantle Hospital and fortunately the results were clear. His bloodwork was also clean of what his doctor called 'the Celtic disease' – the build-up of excessive iron in the vital organs. Swann didn't know who his biological father was, and couldn't give a detailed family medical history, except that his mother had died aged sixty of a heart attack.

After receiving his results, Swann had returned home and showered. It was on his way out the door again that he listened to the answering machine messages. A Paul Tremain of Lightning Resources had called three times. He said it was urgent. Swann deleted the messages and went out into the dull heat of early afternoon.

Swann returned to his newspaper. He was so out of touch that he had to read the date beneath the masthead – Thursday the second of February, 1989. Five-odd years since his double-shooting at the hands of a Junkyard Dogs assassin and Detective Inspector Benjamin Hogan.

Hogan, a corrupt cop, had shot Swann in the stomach and the injury had nearly killed Swann when septicaemia set in, although it was the other injury that suggested long-term damage, after a shotgun pellet nicked Swann's spinal cord.

Swann's wounds had healed, even though there was a risk of re-damaging his spine should his head or neck take a jolt. He'd set himself a target of six months after the shooting before he started swimming and working some light weights, hoping to put rope in his shoulders to better support his neck. The plan had worked, and he'd built up his

strength over recent years, at least until the sickness appeared a couple of months ago.

Swann caught the single column on page five discussing Paul Tremain's Lightning Resources. According to assay reports, and now visual confirmation on the part of invited journalists, the Coolgardie mine site contained one of the biggest gold strikes in recent history made by a 'minor player'. The journalist described the forty-centimetre vein of gold that ran for seventeen metres and likely continued deep into the igneous quartz rock, forty metres underground. According to the article, Tremain himself had guided the journalists down into the earth wearing a yellow hardhat and dusty overalls, letting them run their hands over the visible fortune – an estimated five tonnes of gold.

The article didn't mention the reason for Tremain's unusual media invitation in an industry known for its secrecy. Swann had an idea why, however, based on rumours he'd heard that somebody was stealing Tremain's gold. Not a nugget here and there, but kilos of the stuff. According to one rumour, five ten-kilogram bars had disappeared off a commercial flight somewhere between Kalgoorlie and Perth. There had been more alleged thefts at the mine site. The Gold Squad was investigating and added security had been hired for the mine, but the thefts continued.

Swann had known for weeks that Paul Tremain of Lightning Resources would contact him. The thefts were no great mystery, and there was nobody else that Tremain could call upon. There were other PIs in town, but they were all compromised. Swann, however, wasn't going to bite. He'd made a career over the past decade recovering money for investors ripped off by various corporate scams, but until he got better those days were over. He had promised Marion and his daughters, and he was firm on that promise. Swann was in no position to take on the Gold Squad. Tremain's calls would go unanswered.

## 4.

Tony Pascoe took shallow sips off the oxygen bottle, knowing that he'd need it later. The private room on the fifth floor of Fremantle Hospital was dark and quiet except for the flickering lights of the heart-rate monitor beside his bed. He was no longer connected to it, although a saline drip still ran into his left forearm. His right wrist was handcuffed to a gurney rail.

Pascoe had taken a big risk to get into the hospital, and it'd nearly killed him. At the nearby Fremantle Prison, while his mate Terry Worthington stood guard by the door, Pascoe had suffocated himself with a plastic bag until he'd gone unconscious. That was part of the strategy, although he didn't plan on going into cardiac arrest. For a packet of White Ox, Worthington then ran to the screws and had them call prison medics.

The assumption was that Pascoe had tried to knock himself. After all, he was sixty-seven years old with stage four lung cancer and chronic emphysema. Pascoe only had months left to serve on his twenty-year sentence, but he had no family and hadn't received a visitor for nineteen years. What did he possibly have to live for?

The assumption was fair, but incorrect.

Pascoe had plenty to live for, even if he didn't have much time. The doctors had told him a year at the outside. Six months more likely.

There was no need to rush. Pascoe had grown up in Fremantle, but he hadn't been on the streets for a long time. He'd questioned new inmates about the place; what had changed and what'd stayed the same. There'd been a building boom before the America's Cup – new groynes and sailing club berths in particular. The inner city hadn't changed much, beyond a bit of tarding up. The Fremantle Prison where he'd spent so much of his life was in the middle of the city. From his cell Pascoe could hear the

sound of laughter and music from the pubs, the roar of the footy crowd on Saturday afternoons.

It was in his shared cell that he got to know Mark Hurley, sent down for seven years over the possession of a trafficable quantity of cocaine. Mark was twenty-five, but still a kid in comparison. He'd built himself a suit of armour in the exercise yard and developed the thousand-yard stare, but he wasn't hard and never would be.

Pascoe had only known Hurley for a few months, but he'd developed a sense of fatherly responsibility toward the kid, mainly because of what was waiting for him on the outside. Since last week, Hurley was back in the world, released to an uncertain future.

Pascoe had two sons of his own, but God knows he'd never been any kind of father. He hadn't acknowledged either of them, and had never tried to make contact.

There was no point thinking about any of that. It was too late for him and his sons. He wanted only to look after Mark Hurley.

Pascoe thought of his escape, making the pictures in his head. One thing about doing time – it focussed the will. Most kids that entered the system now accepted the medications that made life easier for the screws. The majority were in for drug offences anyway, and it was natural for them to spend their time doped up and passive, but that'd never been Pascoe's way. He was known instead as a prison scholar, having completed two degrees in arts and law, and an MA in philosophy. He'd written poetry that'd been published in journals. His signature oil paintings on plywood were part of a series of abstract expressionist works that were in private collections. He practised Zen meditation for an hour every morning before dawn, sitting on his bed as the world came awake around him. There weren't many in the system who'd done the stretch Pascoe had, who could say, hand on heart, that in twenty years they'd rarely felt bored or lonely.

The battle was to maintain his sense of dignity within the razor-wire confines of the prison walls. The threat was not external but internal. He had spent so much of his life in institutions that it was easy to become dependent, to become part of it, to let it become part of you.

Pascoe had made a life for himself, such as it was, inside the prison. Outside of the hospital, another world awaited, no more real but one requiring a different set of skills.

Pascoe knew that the derelict camps in South Fremantle behind the abandoned factories were still being used, but that the coppers would look for him there. So too the camps beneath the saltbush and tea-tree scrub at the nearest beaches, or in the remnant bush up on Cantonment Hill. Failing to locate Pascoe among the fringe dwellers, they'd expect him to head east, away from the port.

Pascoe reached for the cannula in his wrist. The skin was bruised and inflamed. The nurses didn't know, but last night he'd taken the cannula out. While a nurse leaned over him to tuck his blanket, he'd unclipped the name tag from her pocket. Behind the hinge of the clip was a length of wire. He had used the wire to pick his handcuff, then removed his oxygen mask. There was no guard assigned to him because he was considered too infirm, and with the impending date of his release, hardly a flight risk. When it became quiet in the corridor he'd gone through the darkened wards and helped himself to clothes and money from the cupboards beside each bed. He now had a knapsack, a pair of ladies' trousers, a windbreaker, seventy-four dollars in change, a male driver's licence and a pair of thongs.

Reinserting the cannula took a while, but he'd watched the procedure many times over the past months, since his first collapse and subsequent diagnosis. Now he removed the cannula in a single movement and put his wrist to his mouth, sucking away the blood. He took the wire pick and worked it into the handcuff, stepped off the bed and began to get dressed. He unclipped the five-litre oxygen bottle from its trolley and lifted it into the knapsack, along with the tubing and mask. It was heavy but well hidden. He walked to the door and looked down the hall. Four am, the time Pascoe usually roused himself to meditate. He felt alert and ready. The old excitement of doing wrong began to work its magic, as it had since he was a boy.