

**ALAN
CARTER
CROCODILE
TEARS**



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PROLOGUE

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There had been little sleep in the night: babies crying, people coughing and snoring, everybody sweltering. There must have been two thousand of them, all slowly suffocating. Everybody terrified and waiting to die. Around dawn they had heard the motorbikes and the trucks draw up outside. The shouted threats, the goading, the cruel jokes and laughter. Surely they wouldn't violate a church? The house of God? Surely nothing. She knew now – nowhere was safe.

Wasn't this how it had always been? How it always would be? You lift your head for a brief defiant moment to sniff freedom and somebody is waiting with a machete to chop it off. Freedom? She had never known such a thing, nor had her parents, or grandparents. She glanced down at her daughter. Nor would she. The shouts and threats growing from outside and the heat building inside. She became aware that people were staring at her.

'What?'

'You,' said an old man, a neighbour from down the lane. 'They're shouting for you. They want you.'

She listened. Yes. No mistake. Hand her over and you will all be safe.

'Don't worry.' It was the Father. 'We will not do it.'

'Why not?' A voice from the crowd. 'They only make trouble for us. Why should we die for them?'

'Fool.'

She lifted her chin proudly. 'I will go. Who will look after my child?'

'Mama! No!'

'Nobody,' said the Father. 'No need. You will stay here with us. Together we are strong.'

‘Who is the fool now?’ the voice from the crowd retorted.

‘Those men outside, they are hoodlums, gangsters.’ The priest tried to calm their fears. ‘The army will not let them do anything to us.’

‘They belong to the army, idiot.’

Again her name was called. A man reading from a list, the megaphone distorted with feedback. Four people. Hand them over. Save yourselves.

Seconds ticked by. Minutes. The shouts and threats died down. Footsteps receding. Engines rumbling. Vehicles moving. Maybe they were going? They dared not violate this house of God after all. The Father was right – miracles do happen. Have faith.

No. Those men had not gone. Windows smashing, gunshots, explosions. Gas. They were being tear-gassed. The children screaming and crying. People trampling each other to get to the door. She grabbed her daughter and hugged her close, eyes streaming from the gas and from her own real tears. She knew what awaited them outside but there was no choice. You have to head for the light. For freedom, whatever the cost.

Angeles City, Philippines – September, 2013

‘What mob are you?’

It was a large gun. Like something from a cartoon, or a Clint Eastwood movie. A Magnum .357, the Harley-Davidson of pistols. The barrel was digging into the corner of his left eye. Driscoll had suspected when he walked over the club threshold ten minutes ago that this wasn’t going to end well. The dance floor was filled with bored, writhing, scrawny girls barely out of high school. Their sparkly G-strings looked sad and cheap and some of them still hadn’t learned how to apply their makeup properly. The place reeked of cigarettes, watered-down beer, and stale perspiration. The sweat oozed from the sunburned middle-aged gubbas, mainly Australian if their T-shirts and Southern Cross tats were anything to go by, lining the cubicles around the walls. Their greedy, predatory faces and overhanging guts multiplied in the mirrors. Girls sat on laps, feeling hands go where they shouldn’t, maybe wondering how, or when, or if ever this might end.

A few pesos in the paw, some reassuring Tagalog in the ear of the bouncer, and Driscoll had muscled his way up the stairs and along the

corridor to the back where the thumping crap music no longer bounced off your ribs. There he'd found Dean stretching a polo shirt to breaking point across wide gym shoulders, hunched over a laptop that seemed way too small for him. Driscoll knew Dean was Noongar and the only Noongars he'd met were real tough bastards but funny as hell. Growing up in a schizoid town like Perth would do that to you. Dean was probably well-suited to running a girly club in the fleshpots of Angeles – one big sprawling Sodom clinging to the fence line of the old US air base at Clark. He was Perth through and through – focused on dollars, on winning. Nothing else mattered.

'Gunditjmara. Warrnambool,' Driscoll said.

'Fierce?'

'When pushed.'

Dean grinned at the man holding the gun. 'Be careful, Mikey. This man Driscoll is "Fighting Gunditjmara". Fierce mob. Complete fucking cannibal. Eats Lebs for breakfast. Got that?'

'No problem, boss.' Mikey was feeling cocky. He would be, he was holding the cannon. Driscoll had pulled his file too before he flew in: Michael Aboud from Punchbowl, NSW – running from a gang feud that had killed four of his erstwhile comrades back in June over a period of less than a fortnight. They were fighting among themselves. The Brothers-in-Arms were a mixture of third-generation Lebanese and second-generation Afghan Tajiks. A wrong word, a tiff over a shared girlfriend, a spilled drink: whatever it was, it had split the gang down ethnic lines and they'd been doing drive-bys on each other ever since. Mikey had been next on the list so he'd taken the first plane out – an AirAsia flight to KL and on to Clark. Now he was Dean's property.

'Coconut though, eh?' Dean, back on the subject of Driscoll. 'Errand boy for the wadjela. Tracker ...' he glanced at the fake ID card in Driscoll's confiscated wallet. 'Tracker John? That you?'

'This is the deal,' said Driscoll. The gun in his eye was beginning to give him a headache and he was sick of holding his hands in the air. It was hot and sticky in that office and he was craving one of Dean's watered-down San Miguels. 'You withdraw your blackmail demands on Charlton's wife and employers, give me any dodgy pics and other materials you have, and erase him from your system.'

'And?' said Dean, faintly amused.

‘You get to stay in business.’

‘You reckon you’ve more clout than the local police chief and district army commander? I pay them good money to leave me alone.’

‘It won’t be enough this time. Play the game, mate. Hand over the stuff on Charlton and we go our separate ways.’

Patrick Charlton was the embassy’s IT specialist. He was known to pop down from Manila to Angeles every other weekend to satisfy his nasty carnal urges on girls his daughter’s age. The embassy had opted to turn the other cheek. Geeks of his calibre were hard to come by; most had been snapped up by the miners or internet monoliths with much deeper pockets. Seventy-two hours ago, Charlton had been found in the club’s VIP room crouched over a thirteen-year-old who’d been unable to extricate herself from beneath his bulk. His face was blue and his heart had exploded from a dodgy batch of street Viagra, recently imported from North Korea. Pictures and extortion demands had turned up in his wife and line manager’s emails the next day. It wasn’t hard to trace them back to Dean. The pictures were bad enough but what galvanised the embassy was the bigger threat of Charlton’s missing thumb drive and the classified documents and codes therein.

Enter Rory Driscoll. ‘The cops and army are back in our pockets, Dean. Don’t get greedy or stupid.’ He realised, as soon as he said it, that he probably shouldn’t have. Greedy, okay. Stupid, not.

Dean was on him with fists the size of Christmas hams and a mean look in his eye. Mikey stood back to enjoy the show, the Magnum hanging loosely at his side; he obviously had a great deal of confidence in his employer. He probably wasn’t expecting the wrench and snap that broke his boss’s neck a few seconds later. And Mikey definitely wasn’t ready for the top of Driscoll’s head driving into his nose. But he did seem to want to hold on to his big gun and, with a strength that surprised, was gradually twisting it around towards Driscoll’s armpit.

‘Michael, you need to stop this, right now. Really, mate.’ The barrel scraped Rory’s shirt, their fingers fought for the trigger. ‘*Khalas!*’

Mikey’s eyes registered surprise at the Arabic command to desist. Driscoll swung Mikey’s arm away and the gun went off with a deafening roar. A framed photograph of John Worsfold and Ben Cousins hugging in a sea of blue and yellow exploded into a large hole in the wall. Driscoll was a Hawthorn man himself. He managed to bury his elbow in Mikey’s

eye then got a grip on the poor bloke's nose with his teeth. It must have hurt because Mikey finally dropped the gun. Driscoll punched him a few times to encourage him to stay down.

He found the thumb drive in Dean's pocket and took the laptop with him; Dean wouldn't be needing it anymore.

Mikey was in a foetal position under the desk, blood all over his face. 'What the fuck are you?'

'Fighting Gunditjmara.' Driscoll bent down and dabbed Mikey's face with a tissue, offered him some bottled water. 'Best to keep your head down for a while, mate. Maybe find another country? Keep your nose clean and we won't tell the Tajiks where to find you.'

Driscoll's phone went. It was his boss, Aunty, sole proprietor of Hope Springs Strategic Consultants and old chum of everybody who mattered in government. 'Rory, my boy. Job done?' A symphony was playing in the background. She liked Mahler. Pretentious old fairy.

'Yep, sorted.'

'Casualties?'

He looked over at Michael, snivelling and bleeding under the desk. He'd recover. At Dean, the floppy doll. 'Just the one.'

'Do I detect a lighter touch these days?'

He wasn't sure if it was a compliment or a reprimand. He could hear sirens approaching and raised voices down the hall. They'd probably reported the gunshot.

'Anything urgent, Aunty? Only I need to be making tracks.'

'We've had a request from Canberra. What's your thoughts on Operation Sovereign Borders?'

He'd been expecting this, had even done some preliminary training for it. The new government was filled with men with a cold gleam in their eyes and scores to settle. They'd been mandated to 'Stop the Boats' and no doubt had all sorts of crazy schemes bouncing around their bitter little brains. Driscoll was right up their street.

'Well?' said Aunty.

He thought about Patrick Charlton and his craving for very young girls, about the sweaty predatory gubbas lining the booths downstairs, about Michael Aboud and his taste for big guns. About poor Dean and his ideas above his station. 'Operation Sovereign Borders, Aunty? It's about two hundred and thirty years too late.'

PART ONE

Fremantle, Western Australia**Wednesday 18th April**

Cato Kwong would have killed for a sandwich and said so. He'd been going all day and somehow never managed to grab a bite. It had finally caught up with him, that growly, low blood sugar feeling when civilisation goes out the window and we are returned to our primal state of foraging mammal.

'Anything in the fridge?'

'You serious?'

Cato shrugged. 'Depends what's on offer.'

Deb Hassan opened the door and peeked inside, rummaging with rubber-gloved hands. 'Milk,' she sniffed the carton, 'still fresh. Cheese, bacon, some tomatoes going soft, carrots, marge – heart tick, two stubbies of wife-beater, half-a-dozen eggs, marmalade. Oh,' a pause. 'And this.' She stepped back with a see-through plastic tub, the kind they give you your olives in at the supermarket.

Cato looked closer. 'The missing ear.'

'Still hungry?'

In spite of the bloody specimen in the tub and the abattoir in the next room, the answer was still yes. His phone went: caller ID Pavlou, his boss. 'Howdy.'

'What's the latest from the crime scene?'

'The victim is a sixty-three-year-old white male, Douglas Peters, lives alone according to the neighbours. Stabbed multiple times and body mutilated.'

'Mutilated?'

‘They chopped an ear off, the left one. And put it in a plastic tub in the fridge.’

‘Nice. Any thoughts?’

Cato limped over to the doorway; his leg was playing up today. An old bullet wound will do that. Once again he surveyed the lounge room: the spray of blood around the walls and on the rug; the body still in situ, being photographed and videoed. Family snaps on a shelf: weddings, graduations, birthdays. All splashed with crimson. ‘Bit early, but I’d say at this stage we’re dealing with a nutcase.’

‘Forced entry? Burglary? Meth head?’

‘Doesn’t appear to be forced entry. Still looking at what might be missing. The body was found by a Jim’s Mowing contractor who’d called round to do his regular clean-up. Wondered why the back door was open when the bloke was usually out on lawnmower day to escape the noise. Saw the blood trail.’

‘What time was this?’

‘Around one.’

‘Hmmm.’ The sound of a door opening and traffic noise. Pavlou must be stepping outside for a ciggie break. ‘Media?’

‘Gathering beyond the cordon. Usual suspects.’ He looked out the window: a no-longer ordinary sunny Wednesday afternoon in outer suburban Fremantle. ‘Couple of choppers up there too, and drones.’

A sigh and some rustling at the other end. ‘When do you expect to be out of there?’

‘Half an hour, an hour maybe. Leave everything to the techs. Doors are being knocked, everything more or less in hand for now.’

‘Fair enough. Had any more of those funny turns of yours, Philip?’ She rarely used his nickname. A racially-charged epithet could come back to bite you on your career trajectory.

‘No,’ Cato lied. ‘All good.’

The room was full and DI Sandra Pavlou held the stage, petite and wiry with swimmer’s shoulders. Late afternoon sun slanted through the windows. Cato had grabbed a drive-through burger on the way back and it sat heavily in his gut. Sharon had pinched his hips playfully last night,

said something about middle-aged spread. She'd been up at sparrow fart on a morning run while he sleepily attended to two-year-old Typhoon Ella who'd recently discovered the word 'no'.

'What do we know about him so far? Chris?'

Chris Thornton was in charge of collating the blizzard of information into a useful narrative. He was made for this job. He'd finally been prised away from Fremantle into Major Crime; he should have come over earlier but he was recently married and had been loath to do the commute from the southern suburbs into the city. Cato knew the feeling. Thornton adjusted his new specs, swiped his iPad and stood up. Compact, boyish, uncomfortable in a grown-up Major Crime suit.

'Douglas Peters, sixty-three. Widower. One adult offspring, a daughter – she lives in Melbourne. Peters was in the Job.'

'Tell me more.'

'Retired seven, nearly eight, years ago. Last position was as a sergeant up in Derby.'

'Anything jump out on his service record? Notable enemies he might have made?'

'Not so far. We're still digging.'

'Anything else?'

'We've got the boffins going through his computer, telecom and financials. According to the phone records he'd spoken to somebody late last night so it appears he was still alive at around ten p.m. We're following up on those people he was in touch with. Nothing stands out on the finances yet, although there are statements for an offshore family trust account that might be interesting. We're also looking at his career before and after being a cop.'

A quizzical lifting of the chin from Pavlou but there was nothing more forthcoming. She twisted her head. 'Duncan?'

The forensics honcho uncoiled his lanky frame from behind a desk. 'Blood all over the place. Peters was pretty much hacked to death. Machete most likely. It might have been personal or maybe just somebody who was really enjoying themselves. No sign of the murder weapon. There'll have been blood all over whoever did it. And there's a trail going out the backyard over a fence into Milky Way, the laneway running along the back. Looks like there was a car waiting, but too hard and dry to get any useful tyre impressions.'

Thornton butted in. 'We've got somebody chasing down CCTV and traffic cameras.'

Pavlou nodded. Back to Duncan Goldflam. 'Any other traces?'

'Bloody sock prints around the house. Size tens. Some fibres on the Colorbond fence. No fingerprints. Some other stuff: plant life, seeds, all going under the microscope.'

'When do you think you'll have a full report?'

'Hopefully a useful prelim by end of tomorrow. Full-ish monty by the end of the week.'

Cato was feeling hot and light-headed. Looking around the room he recognised very few faces: Duncan Goldflam folding back into his seat, Chris Thornton absorbed in his iPad, and Deb Hassan scribbling a note to herself. She had come over to Major Crime shortly after him, putting in the long hours to assuage Pavlou's doubts and repay Cato's support. Hassan caught Cato's eye, nodding towards the front of the room.

'Philip?' DI Pavlou leaned forward. 'You with us?'

He'd done it again. Zoned out. 'Boss?'

'Post-mortem. Tomorrow morning. You okay for that?'

'Sure.'

The meeting broke up and Pavlou brushed past him. 'My office, please.'

'What's going on, Philip?'

They were sitting in Pavlou's glass-enclosed lair. Door closed. Cato had his back to the world and he couldn't see the curious glances over the partitions. Just Pavlou, her geranium and a photo of the family somewhere near the Parthenon. He knew he couldn't keep saying 'nothing' and 'I'm fine'. Nor could he say 'I'm just tapering off some heavy-duty anxiety medication. Bear with me for a while.' She'd stand him down and if he didn't have the job to occupy him what the hell was he supposed to do? 'Just overtired, I think. Ella's a handful at the moment. Not sleeping.'

'Commiserations, mate, but half the people on the squad have little kids. Been there myself, once or twice.' She softened. 'Had a health check recently? You seem ... a bit peaky.'

'Yep, last week.'

‘And?’ Pavlou visibly restrained herself. She had no right to ask for specifics. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Far as we know.’ Cato fingered the foil of pills in his pocket.

‘How’s Sharon. She well?’

All these questions, dancing around the subject. ‘Great.’

‘Back in the Job I see. Saw her on the news at that airport meth bust last week.’

‘Yeah, loving it.’

‘You two good now after that ... time?’

‘Good as gold.’

She was running out of solicitousness. ‘This is a nasty one, Philip. And the victim was in the Job. One of ours. We need all hands on deck. Full focus.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘You need to buck up and sort out whatever it is that’s going on. If you won’t tell me what it is, I can’t help you. The ball’s in your court.’

‘No worries.’

‘My door’s always open.’

‘Thanks.’

Cato went straight to the toilets and doused his face with cold water. He popped a pill from the foil and necked it. He’d be right as rain in fifteen.

Thornton was hovering when Cato returned.

‘Everything okay, Sarge?’

‘Bonzer. What have you got for me?’ The clock on the wall nudged six. He needed to be home, the nanny had to go by six thirty and Sharon was on evenings at the airport. He wondered if he could summon the reserves of energy he would need for a fractious Ella. This was no life for any of them. So why had he accepted Pavlou’s offer to join her squad? Why hadn’t he walked away like he said he would? He still didn’t know – or maybe he did but wasn’t prepared to admit it.

‘Sarge?’

He’d lost it again. Wandered off into his thoughts, had to be dragged back. ‘Sorry. You were saying?’

‘Peters. A first-run potted biography. He’s certainly been around.’

‘Highlights?’

‘Joined nineteen eighty-one, first posting Kalgoorlie. No distinctions, no scandals. Three years on, he moves to Newman. Ditto. Every three to four years he moves to another regional posting: Busselton, Southern Cross, Geraldton, Meekatharra, Derby, et cetera. All points north, south, east and west.’

‘Except the city?’

‘Yep, country boy through and through.’

‘And nothing remarkable in his career? No big busts or scandals which might make him some enemies?’

A shake of the head. ‘A plodder, on paper anyway. Looks like any promotions that came his way were by virtue of length of service rather than dashing leadership acumen.’

A pause. Cato sensed a ‘but’. He voiced it.

Thornton slid the iPad on to the desk. Cato had started wearing glasses; he’d been getting these headaches, cryptic crossie clues turning blurry. Tragic. Thornton used his fingers to helpfully enlarge the font. ‘Meekatharra, two thousand five. An Aboriginal woman died in custody, not on his watch, he’d gone off duty that afternoon. There weren’t any specifically suspicious circumstances. She had an undiagnosed pre-existing medical condition. Neglectful maybe, but no malice intended. Nobody officially sanctioned.’

It was remarkable how many of those tragic statistics from country lockups would be interpreted as neglectful but not malicious. Nothing personal. Add them all up, and they do begin to seem malicious after a while. ‘So if he wasn’t directly involved, what’s the “but” about?’

‘He transferred shortly after. Earlier than his usual pattern – he’d only been in that job about eighteen months.’

‘Maybe an opportunity arose, an offer he couldn’t refuse? Plum posting?’

Thornton nodded. ‘Derby? The plum is in the eye of the beholder I suppose. But he certainly liked it there. Good fishing, I hear. He stayed until he retired late in two thousand eleven.’

‘Six years. Longest stint anywhere. And he would have been ...’

‘Fifty-six when he retired.’

‘Went longer than most. Anything after that?’

‘Two years with private security – a company called CPS. We’re trying to get the details. They’re a cagey, bureaucratic mob.’

‘And then he finally decided to come and live in the big smoke after all these years.’

‘Beaconsfield.’ Thornton retrieved his iPad. ‘Smoky as.’

Cato was ready to go home. ‘Thanks Chris. Let me know how you go with CPS.’

Cato woke about two a.m. just as Sharon slipped into the bedroom.

‘How was work?’ he murmured sleepily as she spooned into him.

‘Slow. There’s a couple of mugs due in from KL tomorrow night who’ll be getting the cough and squat treatment. Vietnamese. Poor bastards are payback for an arrest in Sydney last week – tit-for-tat turf war. They’re dobbing each other in every second day. I’m losing track.’ She yawned. ‘You still awake?’

‘Yep.’

‘Your day?’

‘Somebody got chopped up in Beacy. Old bloke, used to be in the Job.’

‘Lovely. Did Ella go down okay tonight?’

‘Fine. Julie had her fed and bedded before I got home. Apparently she ran out of steam at the playground down South Beach and was nodding off before she even got to the yoghurt and banana.’

‘Hasn’t stirred since?’

‘A murmur around ten but she went off again quickly.’

Her hand crept across his stomach; lightly brushed the old knife scar there. ‘How about you? Are you sleepy?’

He turned to face her. ‘Not anymore.’ Enjoying the smell and the touch, the pressing intensity. Her breath warm and greedy. She straddled him.

His phone went. On silent, but throbbing and dancing on the bedside table.

‘Leave it.’ Sharon drew him in. Held him tight. He focused on the moment.

Light flashing on a left message.

After a while a soft sob escaped her. Cato too was spent.

The phone again. The double beep of a text this time. Sharon rolled away. ‘Want to get that?’

‘No.’

‘They’re determined.’ Sharon fluffed her pillow and pulled the covers up. ‘Put them out of their misery or turn it off.’

He checked: unknown number on the missed call, a hiss and background pacing noises on the voicemail. Accidental butt call? Twice? The text.

I know who did Peters

Nothing to lose. He texted back. **Who?**

And waited.

No reply.

After five minutes he snuggled in to Sharon and fell asleep.