

Wild Fennel

The background of the cover is a painting of a coastal town. In the foreground, a steamship with a single smokestack is moving across the water, leaving a white wake. The middle ground shows a densely packed town with various buildings and lush green trees. In the background, a large, blue, arched steel bridge spans across the scene. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

The Thornton Series
Volume 3

Bruce Mitchell

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This is a work of fiction. Names and characters are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, is coincidental.

The one exception to the above is the character of Fred Maynard, an Aboriginal Australian of the Worimi people, and the founder of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association in 1925. I am indebted to Fred's grandson, Professor John Maynard of Newcastle University, for permission to use Fred's name in this story—it's a name all Australians should know.

<https://brucemitchellauthor.com/>

Cover – Will Ashton poster, c. 1935

To my wife, Marilyn, with love. Thank you for
Your everlasting support, and honest feedback.

‘Foeniculum Vulgare’ – ‘Wild Fennel’

A fine leafed, robust invasive weed up to a height of 3m with an aromatic scent of aniseed. Thrives on neglect, surviving against the odds on railway tracks, roadsides and other harsh environments. Under periods of prolonged stress, the plant produces oils that reportedly ease pain and symptoms of depression. Wild fennel is strongly resistant to all forms of chemical, biological and mechanical eradication. It never gives up.

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Chapter 1

Randwick, February 1918.

Randwick's Royal Hotel sat amid church spires on a rise above the curve of Coogee Beach, a short walk down the hill. It was a classic two-storey Australian pub built by hand in 1887, when life was a little simpler. In those days you could watch the sun rise over the Pacific from the first-floor veranda, but terrace houses and shop fronts soon put an end to that. Where horse-drawn omnibuses once jingled at a sedate pace along Perouse Road, electric trams now grinded steel against steel, carrying a new species of human known as the 'commuter'.

The Thornton family had owned and operated the Royal since 1900, and James Thornton had been in the hotel business since 1858. He and his wife Sarah had raised their four kids above the murmur of a public bar. When James turned 75 recently, he handed over the helm of the Royal to his eldest son, Jim. Their only daughter, Cath, qualified as a doctor in 1916. She'd recently married, and was about to start her own practice. John and Danny, the other two Thornton boys, enlisted in the AIF and stormed Anzac Cove in 1915. John died at the Battle of Lone Pine, and Danny, now 23, came home with a wooden leg.

On this warm Sunday afternoon in 1918 the Royal's upstairs kitchen windows were wide open to snatch a fickle sea breeze, and the pub was quiet but for the occasional hotel guest clomping up the stairs to the first floor. James stared idly through the window at a salt mist hovering over distant Maroubra. His grizzled hair was thinning, but his

grey eyes were clear and his shoulders strong from years of hard work.

Sarah handed him a soapy dish. ‘You’re miles away, love. A penny for your thoughts.’ Ten years her husband’s junior at 65, Sarah’s lively blue eyes sparkled with life. Her heart was as big as Ayers Rock, but nowhere near as hard.

‘I had another call from “Tooth’s”. They’ve upped the offer by 50 quid.’

‘You haven’t changed your mind, have you?’

‘I’ve thought about it. They’d keep us on under contract of course.’ He shook his head. ‘But who’d want to answer to a brewery? The only beer we’d be allowed to sell would be that bloody awful “TB Pale Ale”. The locals reckon you’d catch TB if you drank enough of it.’

Sarah grinned. ‘I don’t know about the beer, but it wouldn’t be the same, living under someone else’s roof.’

‘My oath. Those jokers would come in here with their measuring tapes and sharp pencils, talking about improvements, but all they’d do is cut staff and raise prices, all in the name of profit.’ He absently tossed the tea towel over his shoulder and stared back out the window. ‘You know, love, a pub’s more than just a building selling grog. The Royal’s practically the soul of Randwick. Its secrets, rumours, hard luck stories and wild schemes were born downstairs in that bar. It’s been a confessional, courtroom, and town hall, and it’s seen its share of weddings and wakes. That’s what makes a soul, and you can’t put it on a balance sheet.’

Sarah ruffled his grey hair. ‘You’re an incurable romantic, Mr. Thornton, a true Irishman.’

ooOoo

Camp Funston, Kansas USA. March 1918.

Army Cook Albert Gitchell felt ill. The mess hall's greasy pork chops turned his stomach, and his head pounded like a jackhammer. He slumped into a chair, sweating freely despite the cold Kansas afternoon.

Over 54,000 troops were based at Funston, and within a few days of Gitchell reporting sick, over 500 fell ill. By the end of the month, over a thousand men were hospitalised with influenza.

Provoked by Germany's U-boat raids on American merchant ships, President Woodrow Wilson had joined the allies and declared war on Germany in December 1917. Army camps soon became crowded with recruits, and the disease spread rapidly across the USA. With the arrival of American troops in Europe, by April 1918 the Western Front was in the grip of the 'flu'. France and Great Britain succumbed shortly afterwards, and it wasn't long before cases appeared in Asia.

Despite its rapid spread, the mortality rate of what would become known as the 'first wave' of the disease was not unusually high, and despite causing disruptions to the military operations of WW1, it was passed off as 'just another bout of the flu.' But the disease that would soon earn the name 'Spanish Flu' was far from finished with the world. In fact, it was just warming up.

ooOoo

Sydney, March 1918.

Danny Thornton pushed through the glass doors of Prouds Jewellery Store into Pitt Street, squinting under a sharp Autumn sun. He was the image of his father—sandy-brown hair dropping over his forehead in a perpetual cow-lick, blue-grey eyes that held a balance of wisdom and innocence. He'd returned from the war to his trade of watchmaker at a scarred workbench on the lower ground floor. The familiarity of his old job was a balm to his nerves—the

clocks surrounding him ticked away time in an orderly chorus, even though the world had gone mad.

ooOoo

They stretchered him off Lone Pine under machine gun fire and he woke up on a hospital ship somewhere in the Mediterranean, steaming toward London:

'The ship's throbbing turbines come to him through the depths of darkness. He was back on the 'Lake Michigan'. He'd fallen asleep and was dreaming of Coogee. Any second now, John will wake him—Gallipoli must have been a dream.'

'He opens his eyes, but he's not where he thought he was. Is he awake at all? He turns his head to see men in beds lined up all around him. The bayonet wound—Lone Pine—there's a bloodstained bandage on his arm.'

'He sighs.....'

'But something's not right....'

'He moves his legs. One's lighter than the other....'

He spent eight weeks in London's Queen Mary Hospital learning to walk again on a piece of British oak carved on a basement lathe and strapped below his knee. Each night, Gallipoli would haunt the 23-year-old with nightmares, and although his body was able to board a steamer bound for Sydney, his mind remained shattered. He'd once dreamed of walking down the gangway at Woolloomooloo wharf in triumph, but that was just a boy's fantasy. The smoky streets of Sydney seemed to mock his very presence.

Unable to settle, he saddled a horse and rode across the Blue Mountains, hoping the vast Central West would erase the past and provide a path out of his torment. He rode where the wind took him, getting work where he could—railway yards, pubs, sheep stations. He stumbled across the very first Anzac Day in April 1916, not knowing that in his absence they had elevated him to the status of

national hero. One night in a Bathurst pub he almost killed a man who called him a coward. In Goulburn, he lost his virginity to a sympathetic barmaid, and in Kiama he narrowly escaped drowning.

Everyone was eager to give the crippled young digger a bit of advice, and along the way there were signposts, but it was an Indian Buddhist cook named Rayann who made the penny drop:

‘The past is dead, Danny—it does not exist, except in our minds, and if we let it govern our thoughts, we cannot live fully in the present. Likewise, the future—it also does not exist, but if we worry about it, we cannot live fully in the present. So we must let the past go and allow the future to be created by what we do now.’

After six months he came home, and while there was no miracle cure, he could sleep, at least most nights.

ooOoo

He turned down Pitt Street to Angel Place for a quick lunch and a walk in Wynyard Park. Up ahead, a young woman emerging from the Colonial Mutual Building caught his attention. He’d not seen her face, but there was something familiar about the walk—the sway of dark hair and the purposeful stride. *‘Emma? Nurse Emma Parkinson from London?’* He quickened his pace, dodging the traffic across Martin Place and keeping her in sight until she was just a few paces ahead.

He called out. ‘Emma?’ She slowed and turned—the same dark auburn hair, the same hazel eyes glinting with good humour. She gasped.

‘Danny! Danny Thornton! Last time I saw you was at “Queen Mary’s”. That was....’

He answered with a smile. ‘October 1915. Do you live in Sydney?’

‘Yes, Marrickville. They repatriated me home last year.’ A shadow dimmed the smile. ‘My Mum passed away.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry.’ They edged out of the flow of pedestrians. ‘Look, um, I was just about to have lunch. Are you hungry?’

They shared a sixpenny fish pie and a bottle of ginger beer at ‘Poddy’s’ eating house down the lane from the Angel Hotel. Poddy’s was a favourite haunt of newsboys and cab drivers; a place for a quick meal at a fair price.

Orders placed with a harrowed clerk at a cash register were clipped to a wire with a wooden clothes peg, shuffling toward the kitchen in strict order. Fish and chips were wrapped in *Daily Telegraph* pages steadily darkening with cooking oil. What Poddy’s lacked in elegance was more than compensated by its simple, tasty fare. The place was noisy, and they leaned into each other.

Emma surveyed the room. ‘I didn’t know this place existed.’

‘It’s like a pauper’s kitchen, but the price is right.’

‘How’re you getting on with the new leg?’

‘I don’t think much about it anymore. You did a good job in London, getting me back on my feet.’

‘Thank you. I didn’t know you’d gone. I got to work one morning and your bed was empty. They told me you’d been shipped home.’

‘Yes, I wanted to say goodbye, but they said you were on leave, and the ship sailed the next day.’

‘That’s how things happen in war, I’m afraid. You were lucky to get back in one piece. When I came back six months ago there were U-boats everywhere.’ She shook her head and frowned. ‘This bloody war seems endless, but never mind. We’re both out of it now.’

‘Are you working at a hospital?’

She sighed. ‘Dad was unwell after Mum died, and I didn’t have time, but he’s picked up now. I’m looking for a job at the moment.’

‘My sister’s a doctor. She reckons good nurses are as scarce as hens’ teeth. I could talk to her if you like. Do you have the phone on at home?’

After the pie was devoured she scribbled her phone number on a scrap of paper, and they emerged from the shadows of Angel Place, shaking hands politely in the afternoon sun. Danny watched as she merged with the Pitt Street crowd and disappeared from sight, while memories of London snuck into his mind through a back door. More than once on the voyage home, he’d sit idly on the ship’s deck and think about her, wondering if he’d ever see her again. He’d considered writing, but in those days, thinking straight wasn’t his long suit, and his brain was about as reliable as a two-bob watch. He wondered whether this meeting was more than just dumb luck—that perhaps it was meant to be. Whatever the answer, he wasn’t letting the chance go by.

ooOoo

A wagon piled with furniture stood outside a cottage in Edward Street Bondi, its team of draft horses tail-flicking flies in the sun while two burly men unloaded a wardrobe.

Bondi was a privately owned parcel of land until 1882, and had missed the wave of settlers who followed Old South Head Road along the harbour or headed south to the healing waters of Coogee Beach. By 1918, however, bricks and mortar had conquered its windswept sand dunes and crept toward the jagged cliffs of Ben Buckler Point. By the 1920s it would make up for lost time and become a bustling suburb, with the most popular beach south of Manly.

Cath came out from the shaded veranda and watched the men shuffle down the front path with their load. ‘Mind the

doors, gents, there's not much clearance.' A striking young woman with piercing blue eyes and a will of iron, she'd been hard at work getting the house in order.

They inched through the bedroom doorway and eased the wardrobe into place with a groan and a rattle. 'Just here alright, missus?'

A few errant strands of Cath's light chestnut hair floated about her face, and she brushed them aside. 'Um, not quite; a little to the left.' They nudged the wardrobe along the floor with a scrape.

'That's perfect, thank you.'

The house settled comfortably on a quarter-acre block, lulled by the hum of surf. An old frangipani tree in full blossom drooped over the front bedroom window, its gnarled bark like a grandmother's hands. The place was modest, but had more space than they'd been used to. Having no furniture of their own, they'd relied on family generosity. Tom's parents had repaired and painted a scarred kitchen table, and one of the Royal's guest rooms was now as empty as a politician's promise.

Tom appeared from the hall in a pair of grubby overalls, clutching a large spanner. 'The tap's fixed. It just needed a new washer.' A year older than Cath, he was slim and muscular, with jet black hair, an olive complexion, and dark eyes. They'd met in 1915 when she stumbled upon some odd goings-on while an intern in a convalescent home, and reported her misgivings to the police. Detective Thomas Wong from the Criminal Investigation Branch was assigned to the case, which almost cost both their lives one dark, stormy night in Vaucluse.

After a meandering courtship, they'd wed in October 1917 and moved into Tom's tiny Darlinghurst flat. Cath dubbed it 'the sardine can'—three rooms over busy South Dowling Street just down the road from Darlinghurst Jail. The rent was low, and it was a short

tram trip to the city, but before long, they'd had their fill of noise and chimney smoke, and with Cath planning to open a practice of her own in Bondi Junction, they'd rented the modest federation bungalow tucked in behind Bondi Road's sweep down to the beach.

Tom had inherited his looks from his father via a British ancestor, and his features were a handsome combination of Europe and Asia. Some would say he 'didn't really look very Asian', which was just as well, as anti-Chinese sentiment had been alive and well in Australia since the 1860s, and enshrined in the 'White Australia Policy' in 1901.

Cath's family took their daughter's mixed-race relationship in their stride. The Thorntons didn't share Australia's prevailing xenophobia toward the Chinese, or any other race. When Tom had nervously asked James for Cath's hand in marriage, he'd replied, *'Tom, it doesn't matter to us where you come from, what language you speak or what colour you are. What matters is the man you are.'*

One of the workmen edged down the corridor carrying what looked like a large polished tree-trunk with short branches sticking out. 'Scuse me, mate, where does this thing go?' Tom grinned and gestured to the back door. 'Out the back. I'll show you.' Tom led the way down the back

steps to a large shed in the backyard and opened the door. 'Just put it in the middle of the floor. I'll sort it out later.'

The man lowered the object to the concrete with a querulous look. 'If you don't mind me asking, what the hell is this thing?'

Tom replied. 'In Hong Kong we call it a "Muk Yang Jong" or in English, a "Wooden Man." It simulates the body, arms and legs of an attacker, for training.'

'You mean like boxing?'

'Yes, a little like boxing, except we use feet and hands. It's the art of "Wing Chun", created by a Buddhist nun in the 18th century.'

‘A woman fighter? You mean like scratching someone’s eyes out?’

Tom smiled, knowingly. ‘Yes, exactly, there are no rules on the street. We use anything that works, gouging eyes, dislocating knees, kicking in the balls, anything that preserves life.’

The man raised his arms in the “Marquess of Queensbury” stance. ‘I used to do a bit of boxing. Can you show me?’

Tom nodded. ‘Alright. This is a basic set of exercises, but there are many more.’ Completely relaxed, he faced the Muk Yang Jong, breathed deeply and slowly a couple of times, then suddenly erupted into action, raining lightning-fast blows against the hardwood without pause, using palms, forearms, elbows, fists and feet until the tin shed vibrated with the pounding. The cyclone lasted perhaps thirty seconds before he came to rest, breathing deeply, but

not out of breath. His hands and arms were livid red from the beating he’d just inflicted on himself, but nowhere was there abrasion, cut or bruise. He’d trained for many years to produce limbs that were as hard as stone.

The man had followed Tom’s movements with ever-increasing awe, and shook his head in admiration. ‘Thanks mate, that nun must have been one hell of a fighter. Could you could teach me?’

Cath poked her head around the shed door. ‘Alright boys, playtime is over. Tom, you’re making enough noise to wake the dead. Come up to the kitchen, both of you. The kettle’s just boiled, and it’s time for a cuppa.’

After a welcome afternoon tea break the two workmen steadily emptied the wagon until shadows crept across the street, and after the last tea-chest was lowered to the floor, they rumbled away up Edward Street, leaving Cath and Tom to the silence of their new home. Tom found her out the back in the laundry, wiping down an old copper boiler.

‘Well, we’ve broken the back of it, just a couple more chests to empty.’

Cath cast a critical eye over the boiler’s surface. ‘Good, why don’t we call it a day? Tomorrow’s Sunday, we can finish it then. Right now, I wouldn’t mind having a bath and putting on a clean dress. What do you think?’

‘Sounds good. By the way, is the power on yet?’ He reached for the light switch and flicked it on, but the ceiling’s naked light bulb refused to co-operate. ‘Doesn’t look like it.’

Cath rolled her eyes in disapproval. ‘I’m not surprised. The Council promised to put it on this morning, but that

clearly means nothing. It’s just as well I packed a few candles. At least the gas is on, so I can have that bath.’

Later that evening, Tom was in the kitchen cooking a meal by flickering candlelight when Cath came in. Her hair was still wet from the bath, and she wore a cotton bathrobe that highlighted her willowy figure.

‘That smells good. Let me guess, Szechuan chicken.’

‘You’re becoming an expert. I’ll have to teach you how to cook like us Chinese.’

She kissed him slowly. ‘Now, why would I do that? How could I improve on perfection?’

‘You can’t, you’re perfect, just as you are.’

Salty night air laced with a tang of frangipani drifted through the bedroom window. Their donated Royal Hotel bed was a little lumpy, but comfortable, and the old wardrobe stood against the wall like a palace guard. Cath had drifted off to sleep after their love-making, and as Tom blessed his good fortune, he let the sound of the surf carry him away.

On Monday morning Tom swung aboard the number 82 tram on its rattling journey up Bondi Road to the city. His boss, Inspector John Moore, had arranged a meeting at Victoria Barracks in Paddington. The Barracks was the Australian Army's Eastern Command headquarters, and although the NSW Police occasionally shared information with the armed services, it was an extremely rare meeting place for the two operations.

The conductor edged along a narrow running board with the familiar call of 'fares please!' Strap-hanging passengers shuffled aside for paper boys who'd hop onto the tram with a bundle of newspapers under one arm, singing out the familiar cry, 'Pay-er! Getcha Mornin' 'Erald!'

Tom got off at Victoria Gate in Oxford Street, where a soldier checked his name from a clipboard and directed him to a spartan waiting room. The imposing barracks were built from Hawkesbury sandstone by convict labour in the 1840s, and since the war's outbreak in 1914 it had become a major recruitment centre for the Australian Imperial Force. As he waited, Tom took in the room's cold stone walls, hand-hewn by convicts transported across the world in chains for stealing a loaf of bread or a piece of cloth. He could almost hear the clank of leg-irons and the shouts of overseers under the blazing sun.

A woman appeared in the doorway. 'Mr Wong, I'm Annie West, Major Larkins's personal assistant. Please come this way.' She ushered him into an office with a large window overlooking a parade ground. Inspector Moore rose from his seat and gestured toward a man behind a desk.

'Detective Wong, this is Major Harold Larkins, Commanding Officer of the Australian Army Special Intelligence Bureau. Major, may I introduce Detective 1st Class Thomas Wong, CIB.'

The Major shook Tom's hand. He was a thin, angular man in his early 50s with a clipped grey moustache and piercing eyes. He steeped his hands and eyed Tom with an impersonal stare.

‘Detective Wong, some background on why you’re here. The Special Intelligence Bureau is Australia’s eyes and ears on all matters dealing with national security. Occasionally, we find our meagre resources to be insufficient, particularly at this juncture of the war when labour is scarce. Some weeks ago I approached the Police for assistance.’ He glanced at Moore, who continued.

‘Tom, the New South Wales Police has chosen you to undertake a special assignment on secondment to the SIB, reporting to Major Larkins. In terms of your employment, your pay and conditions will remain the same, and your service with the SIB, while unrecorded for security purposes, will count toward your police seniority. Do you have any questions?’

Although the news had caught him completely off-guard, Tom had been a detective long enough to expect the unexpected, and truth be known, the prospect of working with Army Intelligence aroused his interest. ‘Sir, what would be the nature and duration of the assignment?’

Major Larkins replied. ‘The agreed period of your attachment to the SIB is three months, but it could be extended. As to the detail of the assignment, you’ll be given a full briefing at the conclusion of this discussion.’

Inspector Moore smiled thinly. ‘In other words Tom, the CIB hasn’t been given those details, as they’re “classified”, and this is my cue to depart. My job at this point is to confirm your acceptance of the secondment, and let the Major continue. I take it you have no objections?’

‘No, sir.’

Inspector Moore rose and took his leave, and as the door closed, Larkins’ eyes hardened. ‘Detective Wong, allow me to be frank. I believe the Police call it “off the record.”’ Tom nodded assent. ‘When I asked the Police for assistance, I was expecting someone of European extraction. However, Inspector Moore assures me you are the best detective in the CIB, and insisted it was to be you or no-

one. I'd like to make it clear at this juncture that you may find some ah, resistance, during your tenure with the SIB.'

Tom was no stranger to prejudice; the furtive looks, the whispered asides, sometimes a blatant insult, and although they stung, he'd learned that prejudice was born of fear and ignorance, and such people were to be more pitied than feared. He leaned forward and rested his hands on the desk.

'Major, my ancestry is British and Chinese—a fact I have no control over, but one I am quite proud of. As a military man, you'd be aware that China has declared war on Germany, and are allies of the British Empire.'

'Yes, I am.'

'And you'd also be aware that China offered combat troops for the war effort, but were refused.'

Larkins stroked his moustache self-consciously. 'Yes.'

'And China, rather than withdrawing its support, has sent thousands of voluntary non-combatant Chinese workers to Britain, France and Russia. These men have repaired tanks, transported supplies and dug trenches. Five hundred of them died last year when their ship was torpedoed by a German U-boat.'

Larkins remained silent as Tom continued. 'It seems to me that if the Axis powers will allow the Chinese to sacrifice their lives to defeat Germany, then one lowly Chinese-Australian detective in the SIB shouldn't cause much of a fuss, but if you'd prefer to find someone of a more appropriate colour, I'll get the hell out of here and

leave the SIB to its own devices. If not, for the time being, I believe we should focus on the reason for me being here.’

The Major’s embarrassment was palpable. He cleared his throat and distractedly tidied a pile of papers on his desk. ‘Detective Wong, I meant no disrespect. I was merely explaining that some in the SIB may object to you.’

‘Major, if I experience “resistance”, as you call it, I’m more than capable of dealing with it.’

‘Very well. I believe we now understand one another a little better.’ Larkins cleared his throat once more. ‘As you suggest, let’s get on with your assignment.’

He produced a printed form and slid it across the desk. ‘This form outlines your responsibilities under part seven of the Commonwealth Crimes Act of 1914.’ Tom read through the declaration, which detailed the offence of ‘communicating information to an enemy or foreign power’, with the maximum penalty of 7 years’ imprisonment. He signed and handed it back.

‘Thank you. Now then, down to business. I’m sure it’s no surprise to you that Germany is hell-bent on world domination, and while we’re confident of winning this war, particularly now the US has joined us, we believe the enemy will continue to pursue its ambitions in secret, even after they’ve been defeated. Of particular concern for Australia is New Guinea. As you may know, Germany was active there from the 1880s, and it was only four years ago at the outbreak of current hostilities that we took possession of what had been known as “German New Guinea.” The Germans destroyed their code books before our forces arrived, but among the debris we found a cache of secret

documents, including draft designs for coats of arms and flags for proposed German colonies.’

He paused for a moment, gazing out the window at a column of troops marching in formation across the parade ground. ‘At the outbreak of war in 1914, our diplomatic relations with Germany ended, and their consulate office in Sydney was closed. The entire consular staff were to be interned, but despite our efforts, the German Cultural Attaché, Heinrich Muller, escaped.’ He handed Tom a blurry photograph of a middle-aged man with a monocle and waxed moustache, ‘The last we saw of Muller was when he leapt into a dark-coloured sedan in Macquarie Street and sped away.’

‘Muller’s an agent for “Abteilung”, German Military Intelligence. We believe he’s still in the country, gathering support to re-take German New Guinea. He plans to supply guns and ammunition to local tribes and incite an uprising.’ He passed a typewritten page to Tom. ‘This is a list of Muller’s last known contacts and suspected sympathisers. Your mission is to find Muller and arrest him for espionage.’

Tom gave the folder a momentary glance as Larkins continued. ‘One final word, Detective. Muller is a fanatic. He’s imbued with the philosophy of what the Germans call “Deutschtum” the superiority of German culture and tradition over all other races, and won’t hesitate to take drastic measures to get what he wants. You’ll have the resources of the military at your disposal, should they be required. Please keep me informed of your progress.’

As Tom passed through the gates into Oxford Street, he mulled over Larkins’s racist comments. He’d been prepared to quit his secondment before it had started, but the Major’s

change of heart had persuaded him otherwise. This wasn't the first time the army had refused Tom's services. In 1915 he tried to enlist in the AIF, but was rejected on the grounds of 'not being of sufficient European origin or descent.' He knew of other Chinese men who'd done the same, and after repeated attempts, some were finally accepted, but only when volunteers were becoming scarce.

This assignment was another chance to serve his country. Larkins had made it clear that Muller was a dangerous man who could inflict considerable damage to Australia's security, and perhaps influence the war's outcome, and Tom was keen to stop him. His mind was already working overtime on tracking Muller down. It was what he was good at.

He reached the tram stop and checked his watch. 11.15am—enough time to get to the office, make a few phone calls and clear out his desk. He'd be working at the Barracks for some time to come.

As he watched for a tram, across the street a figure in a dark suit held a strange-looking gadget. It was a German-made Leica prototype 35mm camera, and the shutter was quietly clicking open and shut in Tom's direction.

ooOoo

Randwick, April 1918.

Twenty-two Dine Street Randwick was a two-storey terrace house just up the road from Seroff's corner shop. Jim Thornton had never lived in a house that didn't have a public bar underneath it, and it took him a while to fall asleep at night without the occasional drunk singing off-key in the street. He and Liz saved every shilling they had for

the place, a three-minute walk from the Royal, and a short tram ride to Liz's family in Bondi.

They called it 'The Sun Catcher'. Most months of the year their upstairs bedroom was flooded with morning light, and on chilly afternoons, the setting sun would keep the kitchen warm for a while before they lit the fire.

It was a home more loved than lavish. Paint flaked on the ceilings and the roof creaked in a southerly. Rumour had it that a ghostly 'white lady' hovered in the upstairs hallway at night, and Liz vowed that if she ever saw the old girl, she'd hand her a broom and set her to work.

The kids found wonder in unexpected things. At the tender age of five, young Michael took delight in sliding down the banister when Mum wasn't looking, and three-year-old Helen spent hours dancing her dolls in an endless waltz across the kitchen lino, pretending it was a grand ballroom. Above the fireplace, an old wooden mantle clock Danny had restored ticked away the time while embers cracked and popped in the grate. In the corner was Jim's pride and joy, a 'Victor Victrola' gramophone, with his collection of Enrico Caruso 78 rpm records. The backyard was a barely tamed jungle, home to blue-tongued lizards and bandicoots, and the stables next-door kept the vegie patch in fertiliser.

Today was young Michael's birthday, and he wore his Sunday best—grey flannel knickerbockers, long white socks and a shirt with sailor-collar. With ginger hair and a face full of freckles inherited from his mother, he was a force to be reckoned with. He tugged on his father's trousers.

'Daddy, what's the time?'

Jim checked his watch. 'Ten past one, matey, another hour before the party starts.'

Michael was crestfallen. 'Geez, What'll I do for an hour?'

‘I know a good game—it’s called “help Mummy set the table.”’

The afternoon descended into pandemonium with a dozen ankle-biters running amok in the backyard. Jim rode shotgun on the pint-sized anarchists to ensure injuries were kept to a minimum while Liz cleared plates and recycled uneaten sausage rolls into the ice chest. The loungeroom furniture had been cleared for the party’s finale, a ‘Punch and Judy’ show put on by Syd Stapleton, a part-time puppeteer and regular at the Royal. A portly gentleman with a bulbous red nose and pronounced lisp, he’d often entertain the bar with his gift for impressions, everything from Roy Rene’s ‘Mo’ to a flock of kookaburras.

The gaudy red and white-striped puppet booth was just wide enough to accommodate Syd’s ample frame, and as he slipped inside, his moon-face suddenly appeared on the puppet stage. ‘I’m ready for the show!’ The day was warm for April and the rabble scurried inside, all perspiration, dirty knees and tumbled-down socks. Lollipops were issued to quieten them down in their jostle for best position at the foot of the booth. Jim was the announcer, and in his best imitation of a circus ringmaster, addressed the motley mob:

‘Boys and girls, 22 Dine Street is proud to present the magic and mayhem of...the Punch and Judy Show!’

There was a loud cheer as the curtain parted and the much-loved duo took the stage.

JUDY: ‘Say hello to the boys and girls, Punch.’

PUNCH: ‘Hello.’

AUDIENCE: ‘Hello!’

PUNCH: (shrieking loudly) ‘**Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello!**’

JUDY: ‘Punch! Not so loud—You’ll wake the baby!’

PUNCH: ‘**Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello!**’

JUDY: ‘Oh, really Punch—I do believe you’ve woken the baby!’

PUNCH: ‘Judy?’

JUDY: ‘Yes, Punch?’

PUNCH: ‘Give us a kiss!’

The show cavorted through Punch’s outrageous antics and encounters with The Constable, Joey the Clown and The Doctor, interspersed with gags from Syd and calls from the kids to warn Punch when The Crocodile came up from behind. After the show, Syd staggered from the booth in a lather of sweat and went in search of a cold beer. Michael managed to cut his birthday cake with Jim’s help, and after the birthday song was sung and lolly-bags distributed, one by one the kids were collected by their parents, and number 22 gradually subsided into calm.

ooOoo

Later that night after the kids had gone to bed, the family rubbed elbows around the dinner table. The oven had done its job on a rolled roast and raised the room’s temperature to

a Sahara Desert midday. A squadron of moths dive-bombed the light bulbs with unerring accuracy as conversation flowed.

James spooned baked potatoes onto his plate. ‘It looks a bit dicey in France. The Germans are getting close to Paris.’

‘And the bloody Kaiser’s declared a holiday to celebrate.’ Added Danny with a shake of his head.

‘It’s horrible to think Paris might be destroyed. I can’t imagine how the French are coping.’ Replied Sarah. ‘The papers say thousands are escaping to the countryside.’

Jim shook his head in dismay. ‘This bloody war’s gone on forever, and the empire’s lost too many men. Let’s talk about something else.’ He brightened. ‘Like South Sydney’s chances this year, Dad.’

James beamed. ‘Well, Balmain got the better of us last year, but I reckon this year might be different, with Horder back on the wing.’

Danny added, ‘Wests look pretty strong, Dad. They could give us a run for our money.’

‘Yes, possibly, but my boys will come out on top. You wait and see when we kick off in a few weeks’ time.’

Danny sipped his tea. ‘I was on my lunch break a couple of weeks ago, and you wouldn’t believe it, I bumped into Emma Parkinson, one of the nurses from London. She came home last year.’

Tom gave a sly grin. ‘I’ll bet she’s good looking, right Danny?’

Danny grinned. ‘Well, yes, she’s easy on the eye, and by the way, Cath, she’s looking for a job. What do you reckon?’

Cath glanced at her little brother. ‘Well, seeing nurses are in demand, she’d have no trouble at all. Any hospital would welcome her with open arms. I could call her if you want.’ She gave a wry smile. ‘I assume you have her phone number?’

Danny nodded self-consciously. ‘Yes, I think I jotted it down somewhere.’ Chuckles flowed across the table.

‘That reminds me. Any luck with getting a partner, Cath?’ Asked James.

‘Not yet, Dad. Male GPs aren’t keen to partner with a woman, and the few women doctors I know are already in practice.’ She let out a sigh. ‘And I’m partly to blame, because I’ve decided I’m only charging what people can afford to pay. This war’s pushed up prices, but wages haven’t kept up. Most locals can’t afford doctors’ bills, and that’s not right.’

Jim raised his eyebrows. ‘Come on, Cath, you can’t work for free. People will take advantage of you.’ He glanced at James. ‘Right, Dad?’

‘I’m not so sure, mate.’ He replied. ‘In the 90s recession everyone was skint, but it was the battlers who paid their debts on time, while the well-off tried to wriggle out of their obligations.’

Cath continued. ‘Well, like it or not, that’s what I’m going to do. Funny thing though, I got a call from Professor

Barrington’s office yesterday, asking to meet with him tomorrow morning. I have no idea why he’d want to see me.

Chapter 2

A storm sent commuters scurrying for shelter as Cath stepped down from the tram to the fragrance of rain on warm tar. She was headed to Macquarie Street for her meeting with Professor Barrington, and pondering what was in store. Her only connection with the man was that his son, Hugh, was in her year at Sydney University. They'd both graduated in 1916 and served their internship at Sydney Hospital. She'd never socialised with Hugh. The Barringtons moved in the rarefied atmosphere of Sydney's well-to-do, and Cath, being a publican's daughter, didn't have the pedigree, something which hadn't bothered her as she considered the man a pompous twit.

She recalled an incident at Sydney Hospital where Barrington Jr. had diagnosed a patient as having a benign upper respiratory infection, when she suspected his condition was in fact 'epiglottitis', which if left untreated, could cause asphyxiation. The next day her suspicions were proven correct when she was forced to perform an emergency tracheostomy to save the young man's life:

A nurse bursts through the swinging doors. 'Doctor Thornton! Emergency in respiratory!'

She sprints down the corridor, somehow knowing it's bed 22. Crawford's in the tripod position—hands on knees, bent over, straining for breath with ragged gasps, his lips already turning blue. Her mind accelerates into overdrive and she calculates he has about sixty seconds to live.

'Nurse—surgical instruments and a tracheostomy tube—quickly.'

'But they're locked in the cabinet.'

'Break the bloody glass—NOW!'

She eases Crawford back onto the bed, placing pillows under his heaving shoulders as he looks at her with a dying man's eyes. She hears glass smash and a scalpel is slapped onto her palm.

'Hold him down.'

Thirty seconds left, and Crawford's bulging eyes gape at the ceiling while his neck convulses with the effort of sucking in feeble molecules of air.

She runs a finger down his neck to the third and fourth tracheal rings and makes an incision. Blood pulses out like hot lava.

'Sponge!'

Twenty seconds left.

'Forceps!'

She clamps an artery.

Ten seconds left.

'Retractor.'

Sweat runs down her face and stings her eyes, and a nurse swabs it away. She inserts a retractor between the tracheal rings and twists them open. Air whistles through

the tiny gap and down into the man's lungs like a force twelve gale.

'Tube!'

She feeds it into the trachea and binds it with surgical tape.

Time's up.

Cath slumps back and the nurses take over—mopping, binding, securing. She calls to them. 'Take his vitals. Disinfect the wound and stitch it. It'll need watching—I patched it like a bloody bicycle tube.' She's still panting with the effort, totally drained, physically

and emotionally, and thinks to herself, 'Perhaps I won't be specialising in surgery after all.'

The incident caused a furore, as Cath was an unqualified intern, but an enquiry found her actions justified. Nothing was mentioned about Hugh Barrington's misdiagnosis, but she'd always suspected the Barrington name had swept the matter under the carpet.

The seven-story sandstone 'Wyoming' building loomed on the corner of Hunter and Macquarie. She entered the foyer as the lift glided to a halt and the driver slid the scissor gate open.

'Which floor, Madam?'

'Number five, please.'

She opened the door to Barrington's rooms, where a middle-aged woman sat pecking at a typewriter. A window framed a brooding harbour under grey clouds.

The woman looked up with a kind smile. 'Catherine Thornton?' Despite custom, Cath had kept her maiden-

name when she married, seeing no reason to change her identity. Tom was supportive, knowing full well that names speak nothing of the individual, and besides, 'Wong' as a surname was not exactly an asset.

She was shown to an expansive office where Barrington rounded his desk and shook her hand. Tall and greying at the temples, with hazel eyes and dressed in an expensive suit, he held an air of comfortable self-assurance.

'Thank you for dropping by, Doctor Thornton. Would you care for a cup of tea?'

'That would be lovely, thank you.' His secretary eased the door shut.

They sat by the window where rain swept across Woolloomooloo Bay in sheets of grey. Barrington filled his pipe from a worn leather

pouch. ‘I’ve been following your career over the past few years, Doctor, ever since you made headlines in the “*Herald*” with that Stokeland House affair.’

Stokeland House was a women’s convalescent home in Vaucluse, where Cath interned in 1915. The incident involved Cath and Tom in a night of murderous intent, and her role in the ultimate confrontation was lauded in the papers as ‘the plucky young medical student who saved the detective’s life.’

Cath blushed. ‘I’ve been trying to live that down ever since. It was a while before I could sleep at night.’

‘I don’t doubt it.’ He lit his pipe, sending languid tendrils of smoke to the ceiling. ‘Doctor Thornton, excuse my impertinence, but may I call you Cath?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Thank you. Cath, you and my son studied together at Sydney University. What’s your opinion of Hugh, as a doctor and a human being?’

She diplomatically sidestepped the question. ‘Actually, I hardly know Hugh. At university we moved in different circles, and during internship we worked alternate shifts.’

Barrington allowed a thin smile and tapped his pipe on a crystal ashtray, gazing absently out the window. The rain had stopped, and the State Library’s copper roof glistened under feeble rays of afternoon sun. ‘I’ll digress for a moment, with your indulgence. You may think of me as someone who’s had an easy life—the well-worn tale of a man born into a wealthy family. But that’s not the case. It’s true my father amassed a considerable fortune in the Riverina running sheep and cattle, but he was a hard drinker and a hopeless gambler, and died young.

My mother was left with five children and a line of impatient creditors knocking at our door. Being the eldest child, at 15, I

became the family's breadwinner.' He smiled winsomely. 'There's not a length of fence or a square yard of dirt on that property that I haven't sweated and sworn over. It took a few years to pay off the debts, but it was worth it.'

He shifted in his seat. 'I love my son, Cath, but I'm aware of his faults. I've given him a life of privilege, and I'm afraid I've turned him into a self-obsessed, pompous ass who needs to learn what the real world is like, what it means to be a battler. And that's why I asked you here today.' There was a gentle knock on the door and the tea was poured. Cath was perplexed. She didn't know where all this was leading, and couldn't think for the life of her what Barrington's spoilt son had to do with her.

The door closed, and Barrington continued. 'While following your career, I've learned a little about your character. It took three years for you to pass the university entrance exams, and you eventually passed with distinction. You fought the medical profession's narrow-mindedness against women, and changed some minds in the process, and you learned all you could about nursing by doing the hard work yourself. In short, Cath, you, like me, did it the hard way.'

'I'm aware you're looking to go into private practice, and having difficulty finding a partner.' Barrington caught Cath's start of surprise, and smiled. 'There are precious-few secrets in Sydney's medical profession, Cath. I'm also aware you're planning to base your fee on your patients' ability to pay; a laudable and courageous policy.' He paused for an instant, gathering his thoughts. 'I have a business proposition for you. I'd like you to accept my son as your junior partner. He'd answer to you. I want him to learn from you. I want you to teach him that being a doctor is about caring for patients and saving lives, not about which expensive car one can afford or what parties one might be invited to. In return, I'll finance your practice with an interest-free loan, with no terms. In other words, you pay me back whenever, and however you choose.'

Cath was stunned. The cost of starting a practice ran into hundreds of pounds, and she had no plan to finance the project other than the vague thought of a bank loan, which in these times would be an uphill battle, especially for a woman.

But she'd have to put up with Hugh Barrington. She could still recall his words at university enrolment day in 1908:

'Miss Thornton, women are very emotional creatures.' He smiled condescendingly at her. *'Beautiful, but emotional, and not built to bear the stresses of the medical profession.'*

She was between a rock and a hard place. Could she stand having Hugh as a partner? Would she ever find anyone else to partner with? And what about the money? Something inside whispered to her. 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Cath old girl.' She took a deep breath.

'Professor Barrington, you mentioned you've learned something about my character, and your words were very flattering, but there's more you should know.' She ticked each one off her fingers. 'One, I'm quite stubborn. Two, I'm a stickler for detail and can be over-particular about things. Three, I don't suffer fools gladly, and four, once I make my mind up, I'm afraid I'm a bit of a bull terrier. If you and your son can live with that, we have a deal.'

ooOoo

A few days later, Barrington sat at his study desk in Double Bay, gazing over the harbour at a fleet of sailing skiffs tacking around Clark Island. When he'd closed the deal with Cath, she'd been anxious about her fee flexibility policy, concerned it may turn him off the deal, but on the contrary, her approach was just the thing Hugh needed to experience. Accordingly, the deal was done with a handshake. 'By God, she's a strong woman, and damn pretty to boot.' He thought to himself. 'If I was thirty years

younger, I'd have chased her round that table.' He smiled. 'And aside from her looks, she's just the person to straighten Hugh out.'

As if on cue, a knock sounded on the door and Hugh appeared. He was as tall as his father and well-dressed, with unruly dark hair and eyes with a habit of scanning the room as he spoke. He held himself erect, projecting an air of self-assurance.

‘Hello, Father. You wanted to see me?’

‘Yes, Hugh. Pull up a chair.’

The professor crossed to a liquor cabinet. ‘Whisky?’

‘Yes, thank you.’

Barrington dropped ice into tumblers. ‘I wanted to talk with you about your career, and the future.’

Hugh raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh?’

Barrington resumed his seat. ‘Yes. It won’t be too many years before I retire, and you’ll take over my practice as we’ve planned. Your mother and I intend to travel abroad a good deal more than we’ve had time for in the past, and by then you’ll have completed your surgeon’s studies, and be qualified to run the show.’

Hugh took a sip of whisky. ‘Yes, that’s what we agreed.’

Barrington put his glass on the desk and leaned forward. ‘Quite. But I believe there’s more for you to do, a gap in your education, for want of a better word, and it’s been remiss of me in not attending to it.’

Hugh straightened in his chair, frowning. ‘But father, my education has been second to none—The Kings school,

Sydney University, the best tutors, connections to all the best families, what more could there be?’

‘That’s the point, Hugh. You’ve known only the best things in life. You’ve never experienced hardship, never had to do without.’ He gestured toward the window. ‘For us, this city glows like a jewellery box. Our wealth provides us with every luxury, but beneath the

surface is another world, a world where kids live on the street, where families go without, where there are no flash cars or dinner parties, just the daily grind of making ends meet. That's the world you need to experience. That's the world where you can learn one important lesson that has so far eluded you.'

'And what's that?'

'Humility.'

Hugh smiled smugly. 'Father, I don't need to be humble. I come from a wealthy family.'

'And you've just proven my point.' Hugh made to protest, but the professor stayed him with a gesture. 'I've planned for you to spend a year in junior partnership with a woman I believe you know, Cath Thornton.'

Hugh interjected. 'Cath Thornton? Father, she's a woman! And practically a damn communist! You want me to answer to her?'

Barrington continued. 'Don't sell her short, Hugh. She's a capable woman who can teach you a great deal, if you let her. I expect that twelve months in general practice will give you an understanding of the people who don't live in our world, ordinary people who have nothing to offer but their honest labour. Only then will you understand that medical practice is as much about compassion as it is about

expertise. Only then will you be able to run my business the way it should be run.'

'And if I refuse?'

'Son, I want you to think about this. I know it seems as if I'm punishing you, but I believe that ultimately you'll see the value in what I propose.'

'Father, you didn't answer my question.'

Barrington steepled his hands together. ‘I look at you and see myself as a young boy. You know my story. You know I spent five long years breaking my back to pay the debts your grandfather left me with. That five years was the best thing that could have happened to me, but I didn’t think so at the time. I’m offering you the chance to do the same, but as a GP for twelve months, because I know that if you don’t, you’ll be incapable of running my practice the way it ought to be run. But if you refuse, I’ll have no option but to close it down when I retire, which will leave you without an income. You’ll have to fend for yourself.’

ooOoo

Sydney, April 1918.

Heinrich Muller flicked grainy photos of Tom Wong onto the table’s surface like a casino croupier. Muted traffic noise filtered into the basement below the Lutheran Church. One would not recognise Muller from the man who’d once been Germany’s cultural attaché to Australia. He’d undergone a transformation. His monocle and waxed moustache had disappeared, and he’d dyed his hair dark brown. He’d also changed his identity. He was now Arthur Forsyth, an insurance broker from Newtown.

Muller frowned and shook his head. Despite the change in appearance, his voice still held a guttural German accent. ‘The SIB must be desperate to hire a Chinaman from the Police Force, Herr Kuhlman. He’s short, and obviously of mixed blood; a half-breed. I’ll wager he has bandy legs, like a monkey.’ His second in command, Wilhelm Kuhlman, sniggered at the jibe. ‘Ja, Herr Muller. We have a Chinese monkey on a leash. I wonder whether he will dance for us?’ Muller grinned humourlessly. ‘There is a custom in China, they say, where they cut open a monkey’s head while it’s still alive, and eat its brains warm from a spoon. Quite disgusting really, but only to be expected from savages. Perhaps we can try that with the detective.’

Muller gathered up the photographs and handed them to his subordinate. ‘Our mole in the SIB is proving useful. I want to know everything about this man. Stay on his tail—his office, his home, his family, and report anything of significance.’

‘*Jawohl.*’ (Yes)

‘Is our shipment to Rabaul on schedule?’

‘Ja, Herr Muller. The consignment will be delivered on time.’

‘Very good. Nothing must get in our way. We shall deal harshly with any interference from the Australians.’

‘*Sehr gut, Herr!*’ (‘Very good, Sir!’).

ooOoo

The sun kept its distance from Glebe Point Road on a cold Autumn afternoon. From down the hill in Blackwattle Bay, barges blared their horns in the fight to load black gold from the British Imperial Oil Refinery. Tom hunkered down

inside his overcoat against the wind, his mind absorbed by the hunt for Muller.

He’d learned that Sydney’s German nationals were caught unawares when war was declared in 1914. Some were rounded up and interned, some went into hiding. Others had just disappeared, only to re-surface with a new identity. He’d pounded the pavement, researched police files, knocked on doors and run up a healthy phone bill, but by the time he’d worked his way down Larkins’s list, he’d drawn a total blank. The enemy had covered its tracks well, but he had one more card to play.

Up ahead, a sign proclaiming the ‘Ancient Briton Hotel’ swung back and forth in the wind. ‘The Briton’ had been oiling Glebe’s throats since the 1860s, and was a favoured watering hole for the working class. It was a common man’s pub, where one could buy a

good feed, a cold beer, and more importantly for Tom, information, particularly from a man named Billy Radford.

Billy was a fixture at the Briton; a little man with darting eyes, a photographic memory, and more connections than a telephone exchange. Sometime petty criminal, bookmaker and police informant, they said that if Billy didn't know you, you weren't worth knowing. His age was uncertain, but guesses ranged from 75 to one foot in the grave. Billy didn't seem to care either way.

Tom found him in his usual spot next to a noisy bar, a good place to talk without being overheard. He bought two beers and joined the old man.

'Hello, Billy.'

'G'day Tom. How 'ya been keepin?'

'Oh, can't complain, really.'

'I heard 'ya got married.'

'Yes, I'm living in Bondi now.' Tom glanced about for eavesdroppers and slid a pound note across the table. Radford palmed it quicker than a Mississippi River gambler. 'Have you dug anything up on Muller?'

Billy took a pull from his glass and shook his head. 'That Kraut sure knew how to disappear. It's like he vanished into thin air. There's only one thing that might be worth followin' up.'

'What's that?'

Radford cleared his throat and drummed his fingers on the table while another note found its way into his wallet. 'There's a Kraut at the Holsworthy Internment Camp. He says he worked at the German Consulate and is willin' to trade information on Muller in exchange for his release.' Radford slid a scrap of paper across the table. 'Here are the details.'

Tom pocketed the note and finished his beer. ‘Thanks Billy, I’ll see you around.’

Tom edged past the bar on his way out the door to find a cab. As he left the pub, a pair of eyes watched him like a snake ready to strike.

ooOoo

The Sydney Morning Herald

Wednesday 17 April, 1918

BODY FOUND AT THE GAP

The body of an elderly man was recovered from the base of the cliffs at Sydney’s Gap on Monday morning, 15 April.

The body was spotted by a local resident who was walking his dog at the infamous suicide location, and the Sydney Water Police retrieved it the same afternoon.

The man has been identified as William Radford, a long-time resident of Glebe. Police are investigating.

Tom slumped back in his chair and stared at raindrops sliding down the window pane.

‘Billy Radford’s dead. Smashed to pieces at the bottom of South Head the day after our meeting.’

Tom had known Radford since his days as a constable on the beat in Glebe. Billy had always been reliable, even though he'd crossed the line occasionally, fencing stolen goods or running a 'two-up' school behind the pub. It would be strange walking into the Ancient Briton without Billy at his usual spot beside the bar.

'He wasn't the kind to commit suicide. He didn't jump off that cliff, they threw him off. Billy was too smart to get caught by amateurs; this is Abteilung's doing. I bet they worked him over for hours to get every ounce of information, then threw the battered body off The Gap to make it look like suicide.'

'Alright, if that's the game, let's get on with it.'

He said a silent farewell to old Billy, absently patting the Webley revolver in its shoulder holster. He was coming to the realisation that this assignment would be more than just arresting some rogue German spy—it would be much tougher than that.

ooOoo

Emma was running late. She'd arranged to meet Danny at the Quay for the 9.30am ferry, and when she knocked off a few minutes early and hot-footed it to the locker room, she found her fellow nurses had the same idea. Being Sunday, most had plans, and they elbowed each other for mirror-space to dab on last-minute make-up.

'This damn foundation cream cost one and six, and it's as rough as hessian bags. Are you meeting Les today, Claire?'

'Yes, but I swear this is the last time. Unless he comes good with a proposal, I'm giving him the heave-ho. There's plenty of fish in the sea.'

'Can I use your lippy, Mary? This colour makes me look like a whore.'

‘Yes, it suits you, darling.’

Emma ran a brush through her hair, capped her rouge and took a cursory inspection in the mirror under someone’s armpit. ‘That’ll have to do.’

She escaped Sydney Hospital and headed to the Quay. Macquarie Street was a madhouse during the week, but today it basked in lazy sunshine. A few hansom cabs trotted by, and the occasional motor car glided past with pleasure-seekers bound for Hyde Park. A young couple with three children in tow meandered down the pavement toward the Botanic Gardens, the youngest pushing a toy pram. She skirted nimbly past them and picked up the pace. It felt good to be in the fresh air after a night of bed-pans and antiseptic.

She reached the Quay with barely a minute to spare and spotted Danny waving to her from the wharf. They trotted down the gangway with other last-minute passengers as the ferry ‘*Kirawa*’ sounded its horn and pushed away for the ten-minute trip to Taronga Zoo. Gulls circled overhead as they watched Fort Macquarie tram sheds glide by from the outer deck.

‘You cut it fine Emma, a few seconds more and we would have had to jump for it.’ Said Danny with a grin.

‘Sorry Danny, shift change-overs are a nightmare. One tiny locker room, two sinks and a dozen nurses getting changed at once. It’s a cat fight.’

The ferry rounded Bennelong Point and headed down-harbour. Empty seats were scarce; Taronga Zoo was a popular Sunday destination, and the ferry had a holiday feeling. Passengers crowded the outer deck, savouring the sunshine and pointing to landmarks while children chased each another through the seats. A rotund man played a piano accordion at the foot of the stairway, his upturned hat inviting coins.

Danny stole a sideways glance at Emma. The wind ruffled strands of her auburn hair and she brushed them away, gazing across the water with a half-smile on her lips. During the long months in hospital he'd learned that her smile sometimes preceded one of her droll, typically Australian comments, like when he first struggled along the parallel bars with his wooden leg, pleading 'I can't do it':

'One more time, Danny. It's just a piece of wood. Let your mind go blank. Most men have no problem with that. Let's try again, shall we?'

After their impromptu lunch in Angel Place that day, he'd rung her on the pretence of giving her Cath's phone number, and asked her out to the pictures. It surprised him when she said yes, and they'd slipped easily into each-other's company again, trading one-liners over a soft drink and a bag of chips at interval. They had a good laugh at Fatty Arbuckle's antics on the big screen, and it was only during the newsreels with jittery footage from the Somme that they were reminded of a world at war.

The battlements of Fort Denison slipped away to starboard, and it wasn't long before the ferry's engines slowed to Taronga wharf. The zoo cascaded down Bradley's Head peninsula, nestled among gums and sandstone. Close by, Little Sirius Cove basked in sharp light, where thirty years before, Arthur Streeton had painted his iconic views of Sydney Harbour. The zoo opened in 1916 after the old one in Moore Park had outgrown itself, and many animals were transferred to their new home by water. It must have been quite a sight to see elephants standing on a flat-top barge while calmly riding over the harbour chop to their new home.

The ferry nudged up against a row of old car tyres, and the gangway was secured. They paid their sixpence admission at the turnstiles and followed a steep pathway through the trees. Halfway up the hill, Danny glanced back over his shoulder and stopped to admire the view. 'Hey, Emma, have a look at this.' To the west, Cremorne peninsula pushed into the harbour like the prow of a canoe, and through a smoky haze Dawes and Milson's Points reached out to each other like stranded lovers, longing for the bridge that was still more than a decade away. The sparkling harbour was etched with the lazy wake of ferries and pleasure craft. Across the water to the south, Rose Bay and Vaucluse formed a belt of green between sky and sea.

'There's not too many views like that in the world.' Said Danny.

Emma smiled and tore her gaze away. 'It's uncanny. All those months in dreary old London, I held a picture of the harbour in my mind, and it was exactly like this. And when the work and the weather got me down, I'd dust it off and look at it for a while until I felt better. The harbour was my mind's refuge.'

The pathway led them to a crowd gathered around the seal pool, where the playful animals basked in the sun beside a wide expanse of water. Occasionally, they'd yawn and scratch themselves, then waddle awkwardly over the rocks and drop into the water where they'd transform into sleek, graceful projectiles hurtling at blinding speed across the pool. The crowd laughed and clapped as the attendant threw fish which the animals caught artfully in their mouths, then rolled over for a belly scratch.

Further up the hill, a row of austere steel cages loomed into view. The 'Chimpanzee House' was home to a community of perhaps twenty animals enclosed by steel bars, with a cave-like shed at the rear. Several young chimps scampered across the ground or swung through tree-branches while the older ones with grey beards and milky eyes sat as if rooted to the ground, idly watching their human cousins.

Emma found the eyes of a large male staring at her intently, as if deep in thought. As he loped toward her and grasped the bars, his old brown eyes seemed to look inside her mind, and she felt a strange connection. What those eyes seen over the years? He broke contact for a moment to glance at the steel cage around him, and Emma knew instantly he was pleading for freedom. She gazed along the line of spectators in their Sunday best, pointing and laughing, making ape noises and throwing scraps of food. She wondered whether they should also be in cages. As she glanced back at the old man and caught his look of resignation, he turned and loped away.

Her mood brightened as they wandered through the other exhibits—koalas, red kangaroos, colourful parrots, even snakes, which gave her a renewed respect for animal enclosures. The walk had sharpened their appetite, and they stopped at the refreshment pavilion, a rambling federation-style building nestled among well-tended lawns. They were shown to a table on the veranda overlooking a pond, and after ordering a plate of sandwiches, they watched children chase each other across the grass.

‘I don’t know where they get the energy from.’ Sighed Emma. ‘It’s a different story in the children’s ward.’

‘That must be hard, being around sick kids. How’s the job going?’

Their lunch arrived, and she sipped her orange juice. ‘It’s good to be back nursing after so long at home with Dad. The Matron said your sister’s recommendation was good enough for her, and offered me a job on the spot. Please tell her I’m grateful, and I owe her a favour.’

‘I will. How’s your father?’

‘He’s back at work now, at the train workshops. He’s been a bit lost since Mum died, and gets moody, especially if he’s been drinking.’ A shadow crossed her face, and she shook herself back to the present. ‘What about your family? Don’t you have a brother?’

‘Yes, my older brother Jim runs the Royal. He lives just down the road from the pub. Cath just moved to Bondi with Tom, her husband. I had another older brother, John, but he died at Gallipoli.’ He glanced away for an instant.

‘I’m sorry. That must have been hard for you.’

‘Yeah, but at least I survived. A lot of good blokes didn’t, and I’m just lucky my artificial leg doesn’t stop me making a living at Prouds.’ He brightened. ‘I’ve been thinking about opening my own shop one day.’

‘You mean a clock repair shop?’

‘A jeweller shop, as well as clocks and watches. I’ve been learning about the jewellery side of it, and I reckon I’ll be able to run my own business soon, instead of just earning a wage.’

‘I love wandering through jewellery shops, looking at things I can’t afford.’

Danny laughed. ‘Well, at “Danny Thornton’s Jewellers”, I might be able to arrange a discount.’

‘I like the sound of that.’ They fell silent for a moment, gazing at the harbour.

‘What made you become a nurse?’

She glanced up at the ceiling, summoning her thoughts. ‘I’ve always wanted to make a difference to the world, you know, make things better, and nursing seemed the obvious thing to do. I also wanted to travel, so the posting to London suited me to a tee. I got into a hell of a row with my father when I told them I was going. Charlie Parkinson is not a man you say “no” to.’ She glanced at Danny. ‘What about you? What would you do to make a difference?’

He smiled. ‘Well, I suppose joining up to fight a war was one thing.’ He paused in thought for a moment. ‘There was a fellow named Sam Harper in my platoon in Gallipoli. An Aboriginal bloke. I’d never met an Aboriginal before, much less talked to one. He told me about the rotten deal his people have, stuck on reserves and not allowed to go anywhere. Sam was a good bloke, and we became mates, but I’ve no idea where he is now, or even if he’s alive. I don’t know about changing the world, but I’d like to see those people get a fair go for a change.’

ooOoo

The tigers and elephants at Taronga herded their young to safety for the coming night. Although in the midst of a modern city, they nonetheless obeyed nature’s commandments. Danny and Emma joined the flow of visitors on the winding path down to the wharf. Children who’d been full of energy that morning dragged their feet or were carried half asleep to the waiting ferry. The sun hunkered down behind low clouds and a cool breeze skipped across a steel-grey harbour.

The ferry docked at Circular Quay and they walked to the tram stop under a darkening sky. ‘I’ll ride with you out to Marrickville if you like.’ Danny said as the tram approached.

‘Oh, you needn’t to do that, I’ll be fine.’

‘Yes, probably, but you shouldn’t really travel alone. There are some balmy types on the trams at night.’

He was right, of course, and truth be known, she wouldn’t mind more of his company. She smiled. ‘Alright, thanks, that’d be good.’

They boarded a tram with a scattering of passengers—a couple with two young children, an elderly woman and a man in a suit engrossed in a newspaper. Street lights swept shadows across the seats as they rumbled up George Street.

‘Thank you for the day out, Danny. I haven’t been to the zoo since they moved it from Moore Park. Taronga’s lovely.’

‘I’m glad you liked it. We were lucky to get good weather. Are you working tonight?’

‘No, I’ve got tomorrow off, thank God, and I can sleep in.’

The tram stopped at the Queen Victoria Building and two soldiers climbed aboard. They were young, perhaps in their early twenties, and clearly under the weather, talking loudly and telling lewd jokes. Danny thought to himself, ‘Had a few beers, these blokes, been in some sly grog shop, and are a little the worse for wear.’ From the corner of his eye, he noticed them staring his way, nudging each other with a snigger.

One of them called out. ‘Hey, mate.’ The man nodded toward Emma. ‘Got a bloody good sort there, aint’ya?’

Danny looked over at the two. ‘You blokes better settle down a bit and mind your language. There’re women and kids on this tram.’

The other passengers fell silent, and watched the interchange.

The young soldier gave a snide laugh and nudged his mate. ‘Hey, Bert, how do you reckon an ugly bloke like that’s got such a good lookin’ girl?’ Bert replied loudly, ‘Probably pinched her from a digger that’s overseas, fightin’ for ‘is country.’ The two cackled with mirth.

Two years before, Danny almost killed a man who’d accused him of being a coward, when the horrors of war, his amputation, and John’s death had brought white-hot anger simmering just below the surface. Since then, he’d tamed his demons, and while these two men were in no danger of dying tonight, he wasn’t afraid to take them on.

He made to rise as Emma grabbed his arm, but he smiled. ‘It’s alright, I’ll just have a quiet word.’

Danny approached them. ‘You blokes have just signed up, have you?’

Bert gave a sneer. ‘Yeah, what’s it to you?’

‘Just curious. Your uniforms look new.’

Bert stood to face Danny, swaying a little and puffing out his chest. ‘Fourth Divvy, 13th Battalion. Shipping out for France in a couple of days. What’s it to you? Looks to me like you’re doin’ it pretty easy in civvy street with your girlfriend over there.’

Danny shot out an arm, grabbed Bert by the tunic, and thrust him back in his seat. His mate formed a fist, but thought better of it when he saw the look on Danny’s face.

Danny tightened his grip on Bert’s uniform and fixed him with a stare. ‘Private Danny Thornton, First Division, 4th Battalion. Served at Gallipoli. Got my leg blown off by Johnny Turk at Lone Pine. Lost my brother there too, and a lot of good mates.’ He leaned in to the pair and lowered his voice. ‘Now if you two want to have a go at me, we can get off the tram at the next stop, and I’ll take you both on, one at a time, or two at once, it doesn’t matter to me either way.’ He moved closer. ‘But I promise, neither of you will be capable of getting back on the next tram.’

Bert and his mate eased back in their seats, the fight gone from their eyes. Bert glanced sheepishly at Danny. ‘Sorry, mate, we didn’t know you were a digger. You blokes did it hard at Anzac. We’re a bit pissed tonight ‘cause we’re leaving soon. We’re gunna give the Kaiser a black eye, like you blokes did to the Turks at Gallipoli.’

Danny relaxed. ‘No worries, but remember boys, not every bloke you see in civvies nowadays is a coward. Good luck to you both.’

ooOoo

It was already dark when Danny and Emma got off the tram at Marrickville. Somewhere a church bell tolled the evening service, and dim lights glowed along a deserted street.

‘My place is right around the corner.’ Said Emma.

‘I’ll walk you to the gate, then.’

Danny offered his arm, and their footsteps echoed in the silence. Emma glanced at his profile against the starlight. ‘I didn’t know what was going on when you talked to those two fellows on the tram. They looked dangerous.’

‘You shouldn’t worry, they were just two young blokes blowing off steam, and they went too far. I was like that when I first signed up, a little scared, trying to show everyone how tough I was.’

‘When you turned up at the hospital in London, you were as dazed as a kangaroo in a spotlight. It was quite a while before you’d talk to anyone.’

He chuckled. ‘Was I that bad? Funny, I don’t remember much after Lone Pine. One minute it was all bombs and blood, and next thing I knew I was in London and you were telling me to get my arse into rehab.’

‘Oh my goodness, you make me sound like Atilla the Hun. Was I that bad?’

‘Actually, no. I thought I’d gone to heaven and met an angel.’

She smiled mockingly. ‘Oh my God, how many times have I heard that from a lonely soldier in a hospital bed?’

‘Yeah, you’re right. I should have been more eloquent.’

‘Or more sincere?’

Danny turned to her. ‘No, I couldn’t be more sincere. I missed you after London, but my mind was mixed up. I should have written to you, but I didn’t. I regret that.’

She looked into his eyes. ‘There’s no time for regrets in this world, Danny. Let’s look forward instead of backward.’

They came to a small brick cottage on Cavey Street, and Emma swung open the gate. ‘Thanks for seeing me home. I hope you won’t be too late getting back to Randwick.’

Danny shrugged his shoulders, looking up at the night sky. ‘No worries, it’s a nice night. The stars are out and supper will be in the oven when I get home.’

They paused for an instant, unsure of the moment, then leaned into each other and kissed. ‘Good night Danny, I had a lovely time.’

‘Me too. I’ll ring you during the week if that’s alright.’

‘Of course. I’ll look forward to it.’

On the way home, he relaxed into his seat and let the tram’s rhythm lull him into reverie. Thoughts of Emma drifted through his mind, and he tried to remember the exact smell of her perfume and the glint of sunlight in her hair. He was at heart a romantic, and he knew he was slipping into love; that perilous state where the mind loses its balance, and life seems to have only one dimension. The Emma dimension.

‘Bring it on’, he thought.

Chapter 3

Bondi Junction, May 1918

Hugh Barrington shifted down a gear and gunned his Pierce Arrow roadster through the bends above Rose Bay. The meeting with his father had taken him completely unawares, and left him with a ‘Hobson’s choice’. Agree to a twelve-month sentence working for that upstart of a woman, Cath Thornton, or be denied his rightful place at the helm of the family’s prestigious Macquarie Street practice. If he refused, he’d be forced to go into general practice, or get a job tutoring snotty-nosed first-year med students. If he agreed, it meant a year of taking temperatures and peering at earwax, not to mention being answerable to a woman.

He couldn’t for the life of him understand his father’s ultimatum. The old man was a dinosaur, deluded by the 19th century view that medicine was a “higher calling” in the service of humanity. The old man didn’t understand the modern view that medical practice was a business like any other, where you made a profit by selling a product, nothing more.

He eased the car into Oxford Street, glancing at the paint-peeled terraces and ramshackle shops of Bondi Junction. ‘There’ll be nothing here but common people, with loose bowels, infected boils and cancerous lungs. Little brats with rickets, and old people with, well.... everything. Well, I’ll do it, but I won’t like it. I’ll go through the motions, then go back to where I belong.’

He sighed and turned the roadster into Gowrie Lane, searching for number 6.

ooOoo

Alice Carter pushed a worn mop over the kitchen floor. The linoleum was cracked and curling at the corners, revealing old

headlines on yellowed newsprint. It was her second day as the sole employee of 'Cath Thornton & Associates, Medical Practice', if she didn't count the first afternoon haggling with Cath over her wages. She'd never been a medical secretary before, but liked the 'posh' sound of it. She'd lost her last job as office dogsbody at a nearby iron foundry when it went belly-up. With her Alfred off work with his bad hip, God only knew when they'd be back on their feet again.

Gowrie Lane was well placed for a doctor's surgery, nestled among workers' cottages and boarding houses a stone's throw from Waverley Tram Depot. This part of Bondi was battler territory with a sprinkling of bohemian exotic thrown in for good measure. The 'Junction', as it was called, owed its name to the intersecting tram routes between the city and eastern suburbs.

Cath swept the worn carpet of what was to be her reception area. The premises were basic. One entered a few steps down from the street to a modest waiting room with two adjoining smaller offices. At the back was a tiny kitchen with a door leading to an outhouse. Rumour held it had been a brothel, which hadn't surprised Cath; the place was filthy, and she'd spent days scrubbing it back into order.

Professor Barrington's financial injection had paid for a motley collection of pre-loved furniture—three wooden desks with filing cabinets and chairs, some mis-matched

waiting room chairs and a kitchen table with one leg shorter than the others. She'd also picked up a 1915 Underwood typewriter in a pawnshop. The 'A' key wobbled a bit, but the price was right. She fancied it had been owned by some gifted writer who'd come upon hard times. Alice confessed she couldn't type, but assured Cath she'd pick it up in no time. She'd begun eyeing the mechanical contraption from a distance, in preparation for a full-frontal assault.

It was only after Cath left Sydney Hospital's well-equipped facilities she realised she had no instruments of her own, a rather daunting prospect considering she was about to open a medical practice. The family didn't overlook her dilemma, and presented her

with a leather medical bag stocked with high-end Swiss tools of every description. James had brushed off her protests at the expense, maintaining he'd recoup his investment from family rates.

There was a knock on the front door, and she opened it to Hugh Barrington. 'Hugh, how nice to see you! Won't you come in?'

'Hello Cath, thank you.' Barrington gave her a thin smile and glanced about the room. 'So, this is where I'll spend a year of my life. A little gloomy, isn't it?'

'Not when you get used to it, and once we've cleaned it up, there'll be a fresh coat of paint and new carpet. You won't recognise it.' She paused. 'I gather your father's had a chat with you?'

'Yes, that's why I'm here.'

Alice poked her head round the kitchen doorway. 'Hugh, this is Mrs. Alice Carter, our new medical secretary. Alice, Doctor Hugh Barrington, your other boss.'

Barrington gave a slight nod. 'Mrs Carter.'

Alice took in Barrington's expensive suit and air of arrogance. 'Pleased to meet you, Doctor Barrington.'

Cath turned to Barrington. 'We've a few things to talk about.' She indicated a door. 'We can use your office. Alice, would you mind making some tea? There's milk in the icebox.'

'Righto, Cath.' She disappeared into the kitchen.

'She calls you Cath?' Asked Barrington with eyebrows raised.

She replied with a mocking grin. 'Yes, Hugh, that's my name. Shall we step into your office?'

The room was small, with threadbare carpet and a small window overlooking rusty roofs. Cath's newly-acquired furniture took up most of the space, and they sat at a desk that had seen better days.

Hugh laid his hat down and regarded Cath with a vexed look. ‘So, how did you cook this up with my father?’

Cath bristled, but remained composed. ‘Hugh, I didn’t “cook up” anything. Your father asked me to meet him and offered to finance the practice with a loan in return for making you a partner. Didn’t he make that clear?’

‘Not exactly, he just said he wants me to learn from you, and he’d “made arrangements”. He talked about me mixing with ordinary people and being “humble”, as he put it. The whole thing is ridiculous.’

‘So why did you agree?’

Barrington’s eyes darted about the room; a habit Cath recognised from her university days as a sign of embarrassment. ‘Because if I didn’t, he’d shut the practice down when he retired, instead of letting me take over.’

Cath’s eyes widened. ‘That’s a surprise to me. He said he wanted you to be a GP for a while to broaden your experience, but didn’t mention any kind of ultimatum.’

‘Well, that’s typical of my father’s Machiavellian ways.’

She steepled her hands in contemplation. ‘Hugh, let’s take stock for a moment. I’m starting this practice, whether or not the Barringtons are involved. If you see fit not to join me, I’ll pay your father back what he’s spent and go it alone. I’m sorry about the differences between you and him. He didn’t share his intentions with me.’

‘So if you want to walk away, then be my guest. But if you stay, please don’t behave like a spoiled child. I don’t have the time, or the patience, for that. I need your expertise and commitment, one hundred percent.’

Hugh Barrington's education had begun.

ooOoo

Port Kembla Harbour, NSW. June 1918.

The cargo vessel Cameleon curled funnel smoke into the night air as the tide nudged it against the wharf. Nearby, a hot orange glow from the blast furnaces hovered over the steelworks like hell-fire. Captain Anthony Causley ordered

'standby to cast off' on the bridge telephone and peered along the gloomy wharf, muttering to himself. 'They're late. I don't want to miss the tide.' He was a bear of a man with expressionless eyes whose name was changed from 'Tobias Konig' in 1910, before Abteilung deployed him from Germany as an agent.

A covered lorry motored slowly along the wharf through pools of lamplight and came to a stop. Wilhelm Kuhlman climbed down from the cab while wooden crates marked 'Tractor Spares' were hurriedly transferred into the Cameleon's forward hold. The loading complete, he gunned the lorry's motor into life and drove off.

Captain Causley ordered 'cast off' and 'all ahead slow' and the Cameleon pushed away from its mooring, heading north-east between the twin arms of Port Kembla's breakwater. The night was clear, with a thin silver crescent of rising moon. To the north, Wollongong lighthouse flashed its beacon across the water as he set course out to sea. In the ship's forward hold, among steel girders and rolls of fencing wire, were two hundred 303 rifles and fifty thousand rounds of ammunition on their way to Rabaul, New Guinea, where they would be deployed by native tribes in the service of the Fatherland.

ooOoo

An Army Model T Ford pulled up in a cloud of yellow dust at the entrance gates of Holsworthy Internment Camp, and a soldier emerged from the guardhouse.

‘Do you gentlemen have business at Holsworthy Camp?’

The driver jerked his head toward Tom beside him in the front seat. ‘Captain Thomas Wong has clearance to interview one of your internees.’

Tom hadn’t gotten used to the honorary military rank, and was thankful he wasn’t required to wear a uniform. He showed his identity papers to the guard, who eyed him suspiciously.

‘You’re Chinese, aren’t you? How could you be in the army?’

Tom returned the soldier’s stare. ‘Your powers of perception are truly unremarkable, Private. Yes, I’m part Chinese, part English, but I’m also one hundred percent a Captain in Military Intelligence, and I’d appreciate it if you’d open the gate.’

The soldier winced as if bludgeoned by Tom’s words. ‘Yes, Sir. Through the gates and turn left. Visitor Admittance is the first hut on the right.’

The gates swung open to rows of hastily erected huts crouched inside a tall barbed wire fence studded with guard towers. It was the largest internment camp in Australia, sprawling over several acres and holding over 5,000 men, women and children. It was overcrowded, hot in summer and cold in winter, and at times, brutal. Sentries were known to take pot-shots at internees from time to time. Ethnic violence flared occasionally, and extortion from criminal gangs was common.

Tom signed in at the visitor’s hut under the stare of a burly corporal with a ginger moustache, who recited the rules in a bored voice. ‘Your visit will be ten minutes in duration. I will escort you to the visiting room and remain there for the duration of your visit with the

prisoner. You will remain seated at all times and speak to the prisoner through a wire grill. You are not permitted to place your

hands anywhere near the wire grill. You are not permitted to take notes. I will advise you when your visit has two minutes remaining. At the expiration of your time, you will be escorted back here. Are there any questions?’

‘No, Corporal.’

‘This way, Sir.’

He followed the man down a narrow corridor to a metal door. Throwing back the bolt, he gestured Tom to enter. The room was tiny, about eight feet square, with a small window in the wall and a metal chair fixed to the floor. A naked bulb dribbled weak light from the ceiling. A sliding partition hid the window and Tom took a seat in the visitor’s chair while the Corporal stood by the door in the ‘at ease’ position.

Shuffling feet and muffled conversation came from the adjoining room, and without fanfare, the partition slid back to reveal a face peering at Tom through the wire. Gunter Roth was a middle-aged man with a sallow complexion under three-day stubble. He was slightly built, and his dark, haunted eyes quickly scanned Tom’s face as if committing it to memory. He’d been a Political Officer in the German Consulate at the outbreak of the war, but beyond that, Tom had no idea what information he had on Muller, and he had less than ten minutes to find out.

‘Mr. Roth, I’m Tom Wong. I believe you have information on Heinrich Muller.’

Roth’s eyes darted to the Corporal and back at Tom, answering in a sharp whisper. ‘Ya, this is true. I worked closely with Herr Muller, and have information that will assist you.’

‘What is the nature of your information?’

A smile briefly flitted across Roth's face, then disappeared. 'For this information, you must agree to release my family.'

'Mr. Roth, how do I know your information is reliable? What guarantees can you give?'

'And, Herr Wong, how do I know you will release us?'

Tom knew he was going round in circles, and the clock was ticking. 'I'll make you a deal. Give me something I can verify. Something that would prove your story. If it holds up, you'll be released into protective custody, and we'll talk more.'

Roth smiled again, this time mockingly. 'Come now, Mr. Wong. I'm already in "protective custody", as you put it.' He became agitated, and hissed a retort. 'I am a marked man in here—don't you understand? I have a wife and two kids. Do you think I'd gamble their lives for false information?'

Tom had to lay his cards on the table. 'Give me something to start with. If it's worthwhile, you and your family will be transferred to a safe house.'

Roth paused, weighing up his options. 'Herr Muller's right-hand man is Wilhelm Kuhlman. His goes by the name of William Lowe and runs a shoe repair shop in Sydenham. This Kuhlman is a killer who does Muller's bidding. At the rear of his shop is a stairway to the cellar. This is Kuhlman's office. You will find there all the proof you need. And by the way, it was Kuhlman who threw your Mr. Radford from the cliff.'

Tom was taken aback. How did Roth know about Billy? He composed himself and replied. 'You're well informed for a man in prison, Mr. Roth.'

Roth shot another glance at the guard and lowered his voice again. 'Mr. Wong, have you heard of "Spartakusbund?"'

‘No.’

‘We are a Marxist revolutionary movement dedicated to the overthrow of German capitalism; the idiots who got us into this stupid war. We have people on the outside. Herr Muller is plotting to take back German New Guinea on behalf of the bourgeoisie. If he succeeds, the war will escalate, and more German lives will be wasted. Spartakusbund will not let this happen. We are sworn to stop Muller, with our lives if necessary.’

He slumped back in his chair. ‘I also know the whereabouts of Herr Muller, but if you do not keep your word, you will never have this information, because I will be dead.’

ooOoo

Tom stood in the darkness; eyes glued to the ‘Railway Shoe Repairs’ shop. Sydenham’s locals had long since shut their doors for the night, and the main street was deserted. He’d stood watch on the building for over an hour, and finally deciding it was empty, crossed the road and took a path to the rear. It took less than thirty seconds to pick the lock on the back door to a small kitchen smelling of stale cigarettes.

He paused for a moment and listened intently. He was well aware he’d overstepped the boundaries of ‘legal’ police work. ‘Break and enter’ was certainly not on a copper’s official job description, but his job was no longer ordinary detective work. He was running a covert operation in wartime, despite being thousands of miles from the battlefields of Western Europe.

He moved to the hallway and rolled back the carpet to reveal a trapdoor over stairs descending into darkness, just as Roth had predicted. Easing through the opening, he climbed to the bottom, where he found the door. He entered and swept a flashlight over the room.

The small space was lined with shelving stocked with the accoutrements of a shoemaker; rolls of coloured leather, cutting tools, spools of thread, tins of dye, and old rags. Aside from a standard workbench, the only other piece of furniture was a desk in the corner, and unlike the rest of the room's contents, this one didn't fit. It was too large for the space, and highly polished, and on the wall behind was a large framed photograph of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German Emperor. The eldest grandchild of Queen Victoria, Wilhelm embodied the governing elite that Gunter Roth's Spartakusbund had sworn to bring down. 'A photo on the wall doesn't constitute espionage,' he thought, 'but this Kuhlman had certainly escaped the internment net, and was operating under a false identity.'

He opened the desk drawer, and sweeping the torchlight across its contents, caught the gleam of an ivory-handled dagger laying on an assortment of papers. He gingerly placed the weapon on the desktop and removed the documents one by one, being careful to observe their

position so he'd return them in the same order: A map of Port Kembla harbour, shipping lists for cargo vessels sailing to New Guinea, a pamphlet written in German—'*Die Überlegenheit der Kultur in der Geschichte*' ('The Superiority of German Culture in History'), and two unsealed blank envelopes containing what looked like white cards.

He retrieved the first envelope and removed the cards, but he'd been mistaken—they were photographs. Photographs of himself, standing against a stone wall. A shiver went down his spine and for a moment he was non-plussed until he recognised the stone—it was the wall surrounding Victoria Barracks, the day he met with Major Larkins. Gingerly, he unopened the second envelope, and a blurred image of Billy Radford slid into his palm. Billy was exiting the Ancient Briton hotel with another man who was out of frame, smiling widely, as if sharing a joke. 'Probably the last laugh Billy enjoyed before Muller ordered his execution.'

ooOoo

It was well past midnight when he opened the front door and tiptoed into the bedroom to find Cath asleep, breathing deeply and untroubled. He padded down the hall to the kitchen where the ice-box revealed a plate of sandwiches and a bottle of beer accompanied by a note: 'Ham and mustard for my super-sleuth'. He stoked the fire into life and settled into an armchair while the night's events rolled through his mind like a squeaky wheel.

Gunter Roth had played a straight bat, and now Tom's highest priority was to get him and his family out of Holsworthy to a safe location. Tomorrow he'd brief

Larkins, and with any luck the Roth family would be relocated within hours. It looked like Abteilung was planning to ship cargo to New Guinea, perhaps from Port Kembla, and the odds were that it would be arms and ammunition, but when? And Billy was murdered by Kuhlman, just as Roth had said. Old Billy didn't deserve such a grizzly end, and Tom felt a surge of hatred for Muller. He wondered whether he was getting in over his head. Kuhlman and Muller were playing an international game of high stakes poker. Could he battle them and win?

ooOoo

Major Larkins scribbled notes on a file as his personal assistant ushered Tom through the door. Larkins glanced up briefly. 'Sorry to call you in at this hour, Captain. Take a seat. I won't be a minute.'

Tom pulled up a chair and glanced through the window where a curtain of winter drizzle shimmered under parade ground lights. Things had moved quickly in the past couple of days. Roth and his family had been installed in a Surry Hills cottage under 24-hour military guard, and Tom had been summoned by Larkins, presumably to set up the de-brief with Roth.

Larkins capped his pen. ‘Roth is ready to talk, but he’s demanded that the de-brief takes place here at the Barracks. He’s not willing to meet at the safe house for fear his family may be put in danger. I don’t want to delay this until morning. Our time is precious, so I’ve arranged for him to be brought here tonight. I’d like you to take charge of the transfer and interrogation. There’s a car with an armed motorcycle escort downstairs. The drive from Surry Hills is less than a mile, and I don’t expect any issues. This is strictly routine. Are there any questions?’

Tom shrugged. ‘No, Major. It sounds like things are in hand.’

Tom’s shoes crunched on gravel as the army vehicle waited with its engine idling. He slammed the door closed, and they moved down the lamplit drive through the Queen Victoria Gate into Oxford Street. The rain became heavier as they crossed Taylor Square and turned into Crown Street. The motorcycle escort kept a steady pace in front, weaving a path through the traffic.

In its 19th century heyday, Surry Hills had been a getaway for the well-to-do; an elevated plateau free from the filth of Sydney’s polluted heart. But as the city expanded, the gentry escaped to newly established suburbs, leaving behind a mass of cheap housing and rising crime rates. Tom watched life’s pageant through raindrops running down the window-faded shop signs, paperboys in flat caps calling the evening edition, grinning larrikins with an eye for opportunity, painted street girls in tight corsets, drunks staggering from the light of pub doors.

The car pulled up outside a low-roofed cottage and the driver turned to Tom in the back seat. ‘We’ll just be a minute, Sir. We’ll fetch the prisoner and be on our way.’

Tom nodded assent and watched as the soldiers showed their ID to the sentry. The place was nondescript and shabby, its gardens overgrown and choked with weeds. He wondered what would become of the Roth family after they’d given up their one and only

bargaining tool. On the surface, the Spartakusbund was a potential asset for the allies, but their Marxist dogma wouldn't endear them to the British Empire. He imagined the best they could hope for was deportation to Germany once the war was over.

Roth appeared from the house between the two soldiers and climbed into the front seat, looking a little less harried than he had at Holsworthy. He'd shaved and didn't appear as gaunt. He twisted round to Tom.

'Good evening, Captain Wong.' His face was tense under a film of raindrops, but the once-haunted eyes were clearer now, and Tom thought, 'That's what comes from not looking over your shoulder 24 hours a day.'

'Good evening, Herr Roth.'

The driver started the Ford and they pulled away from the kerb down Crown Street. Roth continued. 'I'd like to thank you for arranging our release.'

Tom shrugged. 'A deal is a deal, Mr. Roth. Your information is vital to the war effort and the security of the South Pacific region.'

The car slowed at an intersection, and the driver made a signal to turn left. Tom glanced through the windshield at a large lorry coming through the gloom in the opposite direction. It was speeding up and weaving through the line of cars. There were shouts and horn blasts as it cleared the intersection at speed and swerved violently toward the army vehicle.

Time slowed down. The lorry's headlights momentarily hypnotised Tom as they grew larger through the windscreen. Roth looked around in a frantic search for escape while Tom drew his revolver.

The lorry ploughed into the Ford's bonnet in a deafening roar, crushing the driver against a wall of metal. The windscreen burst into lethal diamond fragments as the front

seat cannoned into Tom like a battering ram. Screams came from somewhere, and the Ford's horn blared like a banshee.

Three men leapt from the lorry with gun barrels glinting in the headlights. Roth turned to Tom with blood dripping down his face and sad resolve in his eyes. He conjured a capsule from his jacket and bit down hard. Shots sounded and the motorcycle rider pirouetted with the momentum of a .38 slug, dropping to the pavement. Tom kicked the car door open and dropped to the road on bended knee, Webley gripped in both hands as he prepared for the attack.

A figure in the gloom peered over the Ford's mangled bonnet and Tom took him clean in the head. He swivelled to his right and a bullet buzzed past his ear as he squeezed the trigger again, and a second attacker's chest blossomed with crimson. 'There's another one somewhere,' he thought, as a weight dropped on him, and darkness descended.

ooOoo

Cath was worried. Tom had been called to a meeting at Victoria Barracks just as they were about to eat dinner. 'Keep it warm for me, Cath, I shouldn't be long.' He'd said as he disappeared out the door.

She glanced at the clock on the loungeroom wall—9.30pm, and still not a word. When she'd asked what he was doing in his Army assignment, he became secretive, 'Sorry Cath, it's Army business. I'm not allowed to talk about it.'

Well, that didn't help her now. He surely would have called to let her know he was alright.

She picked up the phone. 'I need to talk to Mum and Dad.' She dialled the Royal.

ooOoo

Enmore's Lutheran Church cellar once stored cases of German wine, but on this night it held something far less palatable. Heinrich Muller stood casually before a hooded figure tied to a chair. Wilhelm Kuhlman sat in a corner like an attack dog waiting for the command to kill.

Tom was unconscious when the surviving Abteilung gunman threw him into the back of the lorry and sped away from the Surry Hills ambush. The police arrived to find three bodies on the street and two more inside the mangled Ford. The Army was summoned and Major Larkins peered inside the Ford where Gunter Roth's body showed symptoms consistent with cyanide poisoning. His extremities were blue and his mouth was frozen open in a silent scream from when it burned his internal organs to pulp. Larkins cursed himself for not anticipating the possibility of an ambush, not to mention Roth's suicide.

Tom's head sagged forward as he breathed deeply to prepare for the next bout of asphyxiation torture. Behind the chair, Muller's thug stood with hands clasped behind him, awaiting orders. He was a big man, well over six feet, with a shaven head and the shoulders of a wrestler. His small black eyes were lifeless stones.

Muller spoke. 'Mister Chinaman, you needn't be so loyal to your superiors, *Ja?* They couldn't care less whether you live or die, so why do you refuse to tell us what you know? What information did Herr Roth give you before he died? Tell us, and we'll make your end quick.'

Tom's voice was muffled beneath the hood tied around his neck. 'He told me nothing.' Muller nodded to the thug,

who once again gripped Tom's head from behind, one massive hand over his mouth and the other closing his nostrils like a vice. Tom had withstood the torture for an hour, much to the disappointment and surprise of his captors, but he could feel his resolve steadily ebbing away.

The thug was an expert. He'd taken Tom to the very edge of death many times this night. The heavy black hood was saturated with sweat and his heart beat at his ribcage, begging for oxygen. The thug waited another couple of precious seconds before releasing his grip. Tom's head flew back in a desperate gasp for air, his shoulders heaving from the effort to stay alive.

ooOoo

Cath sat at the phone table, her knuckles white on the handset. 'I mustn't stay long on the phone, Dad. He could be trying to ring me.'

'I know, love.... I'll ring Jim McManus, the Police Inspector. He's got connections with Victoria Barracks. He may know something.'

'Do you think he can help?'

'Jim and I go back a long way. If he can, he will. I'll call you back.'

ooOoo

Blood trickled from Tom's nose and ears from the onset of respiratory failure. He knew he'd probably die if this lasted much longer. Muller checked his watch, and with a sigh of resignation, withdrew a Luger semi-automatic pistol from a shoulder holster.

'Klaus, Remove the hood.'

Tom blinked against the glare of lights, panting to catch his breath. His face was deathly pale and streaked with blood, his hair soaked in perspiration. Muller casually crossed the floor and screwed a silencer onto the barrel. 'I've lost patience with you, Mr. Wong. You're a brave man, but very foolish, for you will die tonight for

nothing. My shipment of weapons sailed from Port Kembla six days ago, and by tomorrow evening they'll be safely in the hands of our dark-skinned friends in New Guinea. So you see, a Chinese monkey is not important to me anymore. I have more pressing matters to attend to.'

Tom was down, but he wasn't out. He was gambling on one thing—the Germans had tied his arms and shoulders to the chair, but not his legs. If he could stand, he could fight; and if he died tonight, he'd take one or two of these bastards with him.

As Muller raised the Luger barrel Tom sprang to his feet, still tied to the chair. Muller was startled for an instant and Tom lashed out, kicking the Luger from his hand. Klaus came at him from behind, and he spun to drive his foot into the man's groin. The thug dropped to his knees, hands grasping his crotch and eyes bulging.

Muller lunged for the Luger, and Tom kicked him hard in the face, crunching bone. Blood sprayed across the room and Muller went down hard. From the corner of his eye Kuhlman attacked with a dagger. Tom whipped around to smash the chair across Kuhlman's knife hand, then rotated back with another blow. He flayed Kuhlman back and forth with the chair like a prize-fighter, raining left-right blows until the man collapsed to the floor. Tom heard the words in

his head: 'This one's for Billy Radford' as he snapped Kuhlman's neck with a murderous stomp kick.

Tom shrugged off the remnants of the destroyed chair as Muller swept up the Luger from the floor. Tom scooped up Kuhlman's dagger and threw it backhand at Muller. The Luger spat fire and Tom twisted from the impact, dropping to the floor.

Gun smoke drifted to the ceiling. Tom rolled to his side with blood dripping down his shirtfront. Across the floor, Muller clutched the Luger in a dead hand; Kuhlman's dagger protruding from his chest. Tom suddenly remembered Klaus, his torturer, and turned to where the big German had dropped, but he was gone. 'So much for loyalty.' He thought, as he gingerly felt the wound in his neck. He

took off his jacket and tied it over his wound to ease the flow of blood. ‘Even Sunlight Soap won’t get this clean.’

It was 2am when he finally made it home. He’d staggered out of the Lutheran Church, and finding the Germans’ lorry parked outside, crank-started the motor and drove to Enfield Police Station where he showed his Police ID and related the evening’s events to the duty Sergeant. Refusing all offers for help except a lift home to Bondi, he found Cath asleep in the lounge room with the telephone beside her on the floor. After an emotional reunion, she cleaned and bandaged his bullet wound. ‘You’re a lucky man.’ She’d said. ‘An inch to the left and you’d be dead.’

ooOoo

The Bismarck Archipelago, June 1918.

Captain Causley rang down ‘all ahead half’ from the ship’s bridge as the Cameleon steamed east of Warangoi

Bay on course to dock at Rabaul Harbour. The ship had made good time despite a few hours’ delay to load coal at Townsville, and he was eager to offload his cargo of illicit firearms and leave port as soon as possible.

The blast of a ship’s horn interrupted his thoughts, and his binoculars revealed an Australian navy cruiser on his tail at full steam. He ordered ‘all ahead full’, hoping to lose the cruiser in the Credner Islands to the north.

From the bridge of HMAS Psyche Captain Roger Roberts noticed Cameleon’s abrupt change of course, and ordered the forward gun to fire a warning shot off her starboard bow. The gun crew calculated range and trajectory and slammed the breech home, signalling ‘gun ready’. Roberts ordered, ‘fire at will’.

Konig heard the shot and ducked involuntarily as the eight-inch shell exploded in a geyser a mere 50 yards away, and knowing he was beaten, ordered ‘all stop.’

Victoria Barracks, Paddington. July 1918.

Larkins's assistant wasn't at her desk when Tom arrived. The Major called him in and gestured to a chair. 'Good morning Captain. How's the wound?'

Tom absently ran his fingers across the bandage on his neck. 'Just about healed, Sir, thank you.'

'Excellent. I understand your wife's a doctor. That must have been convenient.'

Tom smiled. 'Best care anywhere.'

'Yes, I'm sure. I've read the report on the incident with Muller and his henchmen.' He flicked through the pages until he found what he was looking for. 'I thought the Enfield Police Sergeant put it quite simply: "Acting on the advice of Detective Wong I attended the Lutheran Church Cellar with Constable Blake, where we found two deceased male persons, one with a broken neck and contusions to the body, the other with head injuries and a knife protruding from his chest. A Luger semi-automatic pistol was recovered and a third person who was reportedly at the scene is still at large."' Larkins looked up from the file. 'You made quite a mess that night.' He shook his head in wonder. 'Three against one and tied to a chair. How the hell did you fight your way out of that?'

The dread of suffocation and the smell of his own blood flickered through Tom's mind in a preview of the nightmares that would soon follow. 'I suppose you could call it survival, Sir. I've trained over many years to defend myself.'

'I've no doubt of that, and with your tip-off we were lucky enough to catch the Cameleon before it docked. HMAS Psyche was

patrolling the area and Naval Command got a signal to them just in time. They escorted the ship into Rabaul and found the guns and ammunition. The captain was arrested, and they rounded the local Abteilung cell up within a few days.'

'That's good news, but if it wasn't for Roth's help, we never would have stopped Abteilung.' Tom was silent for a moment. 'When the truck rammed us, the driver was killed instantly. Roth was banged up a bit, but not seriously hurt. He turned to me with a half-smile as he bit down on that

pill. He gave his life for his family and his hopes for a better world.'

'Yes. I've conveyed that through the appropriate channels to Foreign Affairs, and they've agreed to keep Roth's family protected until the cessation of hostilities. They'll likely be sent back to Germany.'

'At least they're alive.' Tom's brows knitted. 'I'm still puzzled at how Muller was always one step ahead of us. They were tailing me from the first day I walked out of this office. They knew about Billy Radford, and they were in Surry Hills that night, waiting for us to pick up Roth.'

Larkins leaned back in his chair. 'It baffled me as well. I underestimated the situation that night, and it cost three lives.' He glanced self-consciously at Tom. 'Almost four. Clearly there was a leak in the SIB, and you'll be pleased to know we found out who it was.'

Tom's eyebrows raised. 'Oh?'

'Miss Annie West, my secretary—also known as Anna Braun, Heinrich Muller's sister.'

Tom was taken aback. 'How did you find her out?'

'She was one of the few people who had access to my files. I also suspect she listened in to telephone conversations on the

switchboard. Unfortunately, it took me too long to put the pieces together. She'd been with me for three years without a hint of suspicion. The only satisfaction is that she'll probably be shot as a spy.'

Larkins continued. 'But let's look to the future. With Muller dead and Abteilung effectively neutralised, you've achieved your mission's objective. I'd like to congratulate you on a job well done, Tom.' Larkins rose from his desk

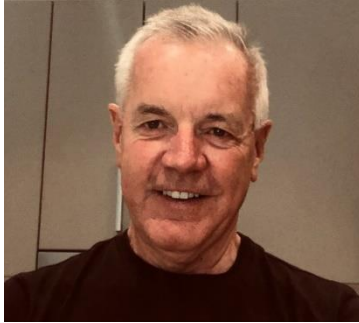
and shook Tom's hand. 'I'd also like to apologise for my remarks when you first arrived. I was insensitive, but more importantly, I was wrong about you. You've taught me a valuable lesson. If one day you get tired of being a police detective, there's a job waiting for you here.'

ooOoo

The tram rounded a bend past Waverley Oval on its descent to the sea. Tom watched the shops and terraces glide by, his thoughts rolling through the last three months. It had been a whirlwind ride through the shadowy world of counter intelligence; a war fought within a war where one could never be quite sure who the enemy was. He'd developed an enormous respect for the men and women of the SIB, who, by the nature of their clandestine work, could never be openly recognised.

And for himself? He'd finally had a chance to serve his country, and in the process, change a few minds about how one should be judged. He'd be home soon, on time for once, and looked forward to Cath meeting him at the front door.

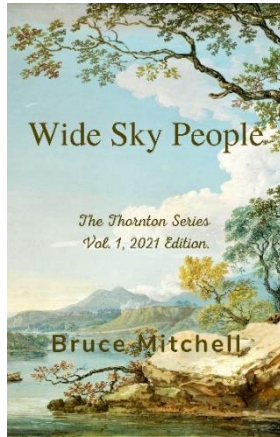
About the Author



Bruce Mitchell has worked as a shop-assistant, labourer, musician, scriptwriter, waiter, consultant and corporate director. His business career took him across the world, with long-term stays in South East Asia and New Zealand. He lives in the northern beaches of Sydney NSW, Australia.

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If you enjoyed ‘Wild Fennel’, Volume 1 and 2 of the Thornton Series are also available on [Amazon.com.au](https://www.amazon.com.au). Find out how it all began!



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https://www.amazon.com.au/Wide-Sky-People-Thornton-Book-ebook/dp/B098DC1XMP/ref=sr_1_2?crd=2XUGKUU3UNBZM&keywords=wide+sky+people



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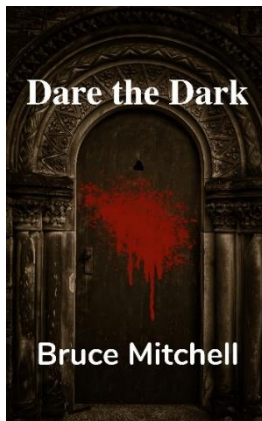
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