

REDEMPTION POINT

FORGE BOOKS BY CANDICE FOX

Crimson Lake

Redemption Point

WITH JAMES PATTERSON

Never Never

Fifty Fifty

Black & Blue
(BookShots novella)

REDEMPTION POINT

CANDICE FOX

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK  NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Nikki, Malpass, and Kathryn

REDEMPTION POINT

There were predators beyond the wire. I knew they were there, although in the months since I'd been released from incarceration I hadn't yet seen one. My evening ritual was to come down to the shore and look for the ominous rise of two dead eyes above the surface of the water, the flick of a spiky tail. Feeding time. Half a ton of prehistoric reptile lolling and sliding beneath the sunset-lit water, separated from me by nothing but an old, rusty fence. I looked for crocodiles every day, drawn to the bottom of my isolated property on Crimson Lake by the recollection of being one of them. Ted Conkaffey; the beast. The hunter. The hidden monster from whom the world needed to be protected.

I couldn't stop myself coming down here, though holding the wire and watching for the crocs brought up the comparisons, the dark thoughts, all those scary old memories of my arrest, my trial, my victim.

She was never far from my mind. Claire would come to me at the strangest times, more vivid than she possibly could have been when she first etched herself into my memory, standing there at the bus stop by the side of the road. Every time I thought about her, I saw

something new. Gentle wind from the approaching rain tossing her almost-white hair over her thin shoulder. The glaring outline of her small, frail body against the blue-black clouds gathering on the horizon.

Claire Bingley was thirteen years old when I stopped my car beside her on the ragged edge of the highway. She'd stayed at a friend's house the night before. Her backpack was stuffed with pajamas, half-eaten bags of candies, a brightly colored magazine; little girl things that would in a few short hours be spread over an evidence table and dusted with fingerprint powder.

We had looked at each other. We'd hardly spoken. But on that fateful day, the backpack would stay by the side of the highway while the girl came with me. I snatched her right out of her beautiful little life and pulled her, kicking and screaming, into my depraved fantasy. In a single act, I ruined everything that she ever hoped she could be. If all my plans had come to fruition, thirteen would have been her last birthday. But she survived the fiend that I was. Somehow, she crawled back out of the woods where I left her, a fractured remnant of who she'd been when she stood before me at the bus stop.

At least, that's what everyone says happened.

Only half of that story is true. I did stand before the child at the bus stop that day, impossibly taller and broader and stronger than her, opening the back door of my car, watching her nervous eyes. But in reality, I'd only pulled over to shift my fishing rod off the backseat where it sat leaning against a window, tapping irritatingly on the glass as I drove. I'd spoken to Claire Bingley briefly, but what I'd said wasn't an invitation to come with me, a plea or a threat. I'd made some stupid comment about the weather. Cars full of witnesses had whizzed past us on the road, looking out, photographing us with their suspicious minds, knowing somehow that we weren't father and daughter, that something was wrong here. Premonition. I'd got back in my car and driven away from Claire, forgetting her instantly, having no idea what was about to happen to her. Or me.

Someone did abduct that little girl, just seconds after I'd been

there. Whoever he was, he did take her into the woods and violate her, and he did make that awful decision, the worst a person can make—he decided to kill her. But she survived, too traumatized to know who the hell had done this to her, too broken to put anything much about the crime into words. It didn't matter what Claire said anyway, in the end. The public knew who'd done this. Twelve people had seen the child, seen me standing not far from her, talking to her, the back door of my car yawning open.

I'd heard the story of Claire's attack described to me so many times across my trial and incarceration that it was easy to see myself doing it. There are only so many times you can hear a lie before you start living and breathing it, actually remembering it like it was real.

But it was not real.

I'm not a killer or a rapist. I'm just a man. There are things I am, and things I used to be. I used to be a cop, a new father, a devoted husband. I'd been someone who could never imagine myself wearing handcuffs, sitting in the back of a prison van, standing in the queue for chow in a correctional facility food hall, a wife-killer in front of me and a bank robber behind. There had been only one little girl in my life, my daughter Lillian, whose existence on the Earth I was still measuring in weeks when I was arrested.

I used to read voraciously. I drank red wine, and I danced in the kitchen with my wife. I regularly wore odd socks and I often left beard stubble in the bathroom sink. I was an ordinary guy.

Now I was a runaway living on the edge of nowhere, looking for crocs, watching the sun disappear beyond the mountains across the lake. Wandering back up the hill, my hands in my pockets and bad thoughts swirling. When an accusation like that comes into your life, it never leaves. The story of what I had done to Claire Bingley played on and on, in the minds of my ex-colleagues, my friends, my wife, Claire Bingley's parents, and the barrister who prosecuted me before my trial collapsed; they saw it just as vividly as I saw it. An unreal reality. A false truth.

People passed the story on to each other in whispers as I walked

into the court in cuffs. The media printed it. The television stations ran it. The story was so real that it came to me in flashes of light in the strangest moments—while I was showering, while I was sitting alone on the porch drinking Wild Turkey and watching the water. I dreamed about it often, woke sweating and twisted in my sheets.

I am not, and never have been, a pedophile. I don't find children sexually attractive. I never laid a hand on Claire Bingley. But that doesn't matter. To the world, I am a monster. Nothing was ever going to change that.

Working on my goose house seemed to drive out the darkness, so I went to the newly erected structure and stood before it, making plans. Around me on the sprawling, empty lawn seven geese wandered, plucking at the grass, muttering and clucking contentedly to one another. When one settled by my feet, her hunger apparently sated, I reached down and stroked the back of her soft gray neck, the feathers collapsing, weightless, until I felt the soft, warm flesh of her neck underneath. My geese don't think I'm a monster, and that's something, at least.

I never planned on being a goose daddy. I spent eight months in prison with no idea if I was ever going to see the outside world again, let alone what I might do if I was ever released. I didn't have a home to go to. Three weeks after my arrest, my wife Kelly had started to turn her back on me, the weight of the evidence against me and the pressure of the public opinion simply too much for her to withstand. I didn't make any plans for life after the accusation. I was taken to prison and I tried to survive each day there without going completely insane or getting myself killed. Then, without warning, three months into the trial proceedings, with my lawyer looking more strained and exhausted with every passing day, the Office of Public Prosecutions dropped the charges against me. The legal procedure, a motion of "no billing," meant that I was not technically acquitted. I was not guilty—but I was not innocent either. There simply wasn't enough evidence to ensure I would be convicted, so they decided to let me go until new evidence could be acquired, if any ever surfaced. With the knowledge

that I could be re-charged at any time, I was sent out into a hateful city. I went home, packed my things and fled north on nothing more than the instinct to hide and terror of the public's revenge. Kelly wasn't at home when I left. She refused to see me. I had to borrow a car from my lawyer.

Not long after I'd arrived in Crimson Lake and rented this small, beat-up house, a mother goose with a broken wing had showed up and interrupted my sunset drinking, squawking and flapping on the other side of the wire—the croc side. It was the first time in more than a year that I'd laid eyes on a creature more helpless than myself. The three-foot-tall, snow-white *Anser domesticus*, which I named Woman, had six fluffy chicks trailing behind her, just begging something slippery and primordial to emerge from the dark waters of the lake and snap her up. Since then, Woman the goose and her babies and me had lived together on the edge of the water and tried to heal.

Her babies had grown up quickly, and these were the creatures that surrounded me now as I assembled their new living quarters, approaching at times, examining my bare feet in the lush grass or pecking at my pockets where I sometimes kept grain pellets. Watching, their beady eyes following my hands as I pushed the screws into the corrugated iron roof of the playhouse.

Yes, instead of a proper goose coop, I'd acquired a children's playhouse. Not the most sensible idea for a notorious accused child rapist living in hiding with no children at home. I'd found the playhouse online, free to whomever was willing to come and pick it up from the nearby town of Holloways Beach. I'd scrolled past it at first. It was a dangerous idea. Vigilantes and gawkers had learned of my presence not long after I arrived in town, and they still drove by my house every now and then, curious about the man who'd somehow escaped justice. And one in three times when I opened the front door to a knock, it was a journalist who greeted me, notebook and pen thrust out like guns. All it would take was for one of these people to spy the playhouse in the backyard to bring the press and the public mob to my front door, pitchforks in hand, once more.

But money hadn't exactly been in abundance, and the playhouse was free. A genuine goose coop cost anything from \$1,200 upward, and all I really needed to do to the playhouse was remove the floor and replace it with wire, and build a ramp to the entrance for Woman and her young. Since I'd found them, the family of geese had settled on the porch of my small, barren house, and I liked to sleep out there on the couch sometimes when the night was hot and loud with the barking of crocodiles and the cry of night birds. More than once I'd been awakened at dawn by the sensation of a goose beak foraging for bugs in my hair. Sometimes the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes in the morning was a curious bird-face inches from mine, waiting for me to hand out the breakfast pellets. Something had to give.

I squatted in the grass and swept away some of the cobwebs from under the playhouse, tested the base with my fingers. I would cut it out with a jigsaw, staple a sheet of wire across the bottom, then fit a steel tray I could un hinge and spray out to keep the house clean. The construction of the cubby was solid and would protect the birds from the foxes and snakes that sometimes made guest appearances around the property, preying on waterhens down by the shore. I went to the front of the playhouse and opened the shuttered windows, tore down the moldy curtains that some kid had probably spent many years enjoying drawing against the outside world, closing their little house off in privacy for their games. Playing house. My daughter might have enjoyed a playhouse like this. She was going to be two years old in a week. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her in person, held her, warm and wriggling, against my chest.

"I'll tie these up for now," I said, pushing the shutters closed on the windows, showing the geese as the chipped wooden frames clicked into place. "But eventually I'll probably put locks on. You can have them open during the day. You lot are sleeping in here tonight." I pointed, stern. "You're not sleeping with me. It's getting weird."

Woman, the only white goose, wandered close at the sound of my voice and tilted her small head, eyeballing me. I reached out to pat her

but she swung her head away as she usually did, muttering. She'd never been very affectionate, but I'd never stopped trying to win her over.

"Two shelves for roosting." I showed her, leveling my hands halfway up the house, mapping out my vision. "And I'll put in some of that straw you like. Snug and safe, the lot of you. It'll be grand—probably grander than you need, but I'm a nice guy. What can I say?"

I shrugged, looked for an answer. The goose looked away.

I talked to my geese all the time. Particularly Woman. I recognized that I had started doing it at the same time as I realized it was too late to stop. I talked to her like a wife. Updated her about things I'd seen while out and about in the town, chatted to her absentmindedly, let her in on my thought processes. I would talk to the bird through the screen door to the kitchen while I cooked dinner, throwing things into the pot on the stove, the bird settled on the porch just outside the door, preening. I'd heard that lonely people talk to themselves. I'm not sure I was lonely, exactly, but I sorely missed having a wife. Kelly used to sit at the kitchen table when I was cooking, drinking wine, flipping through magazines, as disinterested in my ramblings as the regal mother bird. You can talk to people in prison, of course; there are no rules against it. But the guards will invariably answer you in single words until you give up and go away, and I was housed in protective segregation because of the nature of my charges. The inmates in my pod were mostly pedophiles, and pedophiles rarely come into the company of others of their kind in the outside world. So they like to talk about what they have in common. A lot. The only feedback I ever got from the geese was questioning looks and indecipherable bird babble—but I never had nightmares about that.

I left the geese and went up the stairs to the porch and into the kitchen. There were cable ties in the bottom drawer beside the sink, left over from some running repairs I had done when I moved into the old house. Deciding I'd use them to secure the windows of the cubby, I crouched and rummaged around in the clutter for them.

I was just slower than my attacker had anticipated as I rose up. If he'd been on point, he'd probably have killed me. But the wooden

baseball bat whizzed over the top of my head and smashed into the wine bottles lining the windowsill, spraying wine and glass everywhere.

Emotion whipped up through me, an enormous swell of terror and anger and shock that seemed to balloon out from under my ribs and sizzle down my arms and over my scalp. There wasn't time to shout out, ask questions. A man was in my kitchen and he was swinging at me viciously with a baseball bat, my own bat, a weapon I'd been keeping just inside the front door to threaten the vigilantes with. He swung again and got me in the upper arm. The pain blinded me. I put my hands up as a reflex. The bat was coming again. I couldn't see my attacker. It was happening too fast. Shock of blond hair. Dark eyes. I bowed and threw myself at his waist.

We crashed into the dining room table and chairs. Ridiculously logical thoughts started zipping through my brain, caught and pulled down randomly from the whirlwind. The geese were screaming in the yard. The lights were on, and I hadn't turned them on. There was blood on my hands. The man had hit me in the face and I hadn't even felt it. I was yelling "Fuck! Fuck!" and he was saying nothing, determined only to hurt me, to bring me down.

He wasn't bigger than me. Not many people are. But there was a fury in him so hot and wild, he had all the impossible strength of a cornered animal. His anger would trump my desire to survive in this struggle. I knew it, but I kept fighting, kept growling, kept trying to get ahold of any part of him, his shirt, his hair, his sweat-damp neck. He dropped the bat. I pinned him and he bucked and I fell against the cupboards. His fist smashed into the side of my head from low down, a full-arm swing up and into my temple. The floor smacked my face. Hands around my throat, a tight band of fingers crossing my windpipe. I didn't even have time to fear that I was going to die. I grabbed at his knuckles and then passed out.

The sound of the geese woke me. They make a peeling, squealing kind of distress noise, a screaming punctuated by deep, growling honks. I remember thinking as I lay on the floor of my kitchen and listened to them that the sound meant that they were still alive, and that was all that mattered, really. I was lying on my front with my hands at the small of my back. As I shifted, I felt one of the cable ties I'd pulled from the bottom drawer around my wrists let a little blood flow into my numb fingers. Prickling, stinging. A black boot passed near my face.

He was raiding my house. I've been raided a few times since all this began, my house turned over by Crimson Lake cops with a grudge. I've come to recognize the sound of it. A crash, the whisper of papers sliding across the polished wood floor. A drawer clunking as it's wrenched from the dresser. I looked around. All the kitchen cupboard doors were open, smashed cups and plates, Tupperware containers on the floor. Wine everywhere, running down the cupboards like thin blood. One of the chairs was broken. He'd started here, moved from room to room. I tried to shift upward, assess anything broken or bent inside me. Everything hurt in equal measure.

"Don't move."

The boot came back, emerged from the blur at the corner of my vision and shoved me back down onto the floor. I heard a goose's wings flapping on the porch. I watched the blond man as he disappeared again into the bedroom, came to the kitchen table and righted the remaining dining room chair. He sat, dumped my laptop on the table and pushed it open.

"There's nothing in the house," he said. "I didn't think you kept it online. Too traceable that way. But maybe I'm wrong."

He became distracted, clicking through the inner workings of my computer. I braved a covert, awkward shuffle into the corner of the kitchen. I pushed myself up, took a moment to look at my attacker. I was steadily growing hotter. My entire body boiling beneath my clothes. Recognition. I knew this man. I knew his thin, angular face and big, dark blue eyes.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” He clicked around the computer, glanced at me. Looking at my face brought him out of his frenzied search of the laptop. I shifted backward, but there was nowhere to go. “I’m looking for pictures. Videos. Documents.”

He was looking for child porn. Whoever this man was, wherever I had seen him before, he was associated with my case. This wasn’t a robbery, although I’d known that from the anger. This was personal. I felt blood running down my jaw, tasted it between my teeth. His shirt was torn. I hadn’t made much of an impact.

“If you leave, I won’t call the police,” I said.

“Do the police respond when you call them?” He snorted. Bitter. “I wonder how far they’d have to come. Whether they’d make it in time.”

“Look, I don’t know who you are—”

“You don’t?” The man’s brow dipped just once. Genuine shock. “Really?”

He grabbed the baseball bat from the floor and came toward me. My stomach plummeted.

“Please don’t.”

“You really don’t know who I am?”

“Please.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. He grabbed my jaw and shoved my head against the cupboards until I opened them.

“Look at me,” he snarled. “Look at my face.”

I could hardly breathe. If I didn’t get the picture soon he was going to kill me. I could see him losing control again. Twitching in the muscles of his tight, red neck. His heart was hammering—jugular ticking fast in his neck. I searched his face and cringed as it came to me.

“Oh, god. You’re Claire’s father.”

The baseball bat was in his fist. I cowered into the corner, expecting another blow as he rose to his feet.

“That’s right, shithead.”

I'd hardly looked at my victim's parents during my trial. Not *my* victim. Claire. I had to stop thinking about her that way. The way the rest of the country was looking at her. Because I didn't deserve this. There were angry tears on my face as a brief swell of defiance prickled in my chest.

"What took you so long?" I asked. "I expected you to be out there with the mob when they televised where I lived six months ago."

"Yeah?" He sat down again. "Sorry. I wanted a more personal visit."

"What are you gonna do?" I asked. It wasn't a challenge. I was serious. Because whatever he'd told himself about coming here and finding child porn and having me sent back to jail wasn't going to pan out, and he was starting to realize that. He could do whatever he wanted to me out here, and no one would hear me scream. I wasn't sure a beating would satisfy him. If he was going to kill me, all I wanted was to be sure he wouldn't touch my fucking geese. I started working my way mentally toward an argument for them. Toward getting him to make me a promise. But it was hard to maintain complete consciousness. He'd really smacked me around, maybe even after I'd passed out. The lights above me weren't completely clear. I had the feeling I'd been kicked in the chest a few times. Things were crunching and rattling as I breathed.

He was back in the chair, ignoring me. Head in his hands, fingers gripping his hair, thinking, as I was thinking.

"I kept a picture of you," he said. He drew a long breath, let it out slow. "Since Claire picked you out of the photo lineup. I asked the cops to show me the lineup, show me who she'd identified. You. I asked if I could take the picture. I kept it in my wallet. I would look at it sometimes to remind myself that you were just a man. That you weren't some . . . thing. A ghost."

A car drove by on the road outside. I thought about screaming.

"I figured if I let myself get overwhelmed by the idea that you were more than you really were, then I'd start to see you everywhere," he said. He rubbed his hands together. Examined his skinned knuckles.

“Rose, my wife, she was seeing you everywhere even after you were arrested. Big men hanging around little girls. Fathers with their daughters, you know? No. I’d take out the picture and look at your face and I’d think to myself, *He’s a man, and he’s in prison, and he can’t hurt her anymore.*”

His lip twitched. I saw a flash of teeth.

“But then they let you out of prison,” he said. “And I didn’t know where you were. And you kept hurting her. Even though you were nowhere near her. She hurts. Every day. Just . . . Just being alive.”

I was shivering from head to foot. The new calm that had overtaken him was sending my terror into overdrive. This man had the capacity to kill me. Not as he had been before, blinded by fury. But like this. Calm, and methodical. No one would investigate my death very deeply. Any number of people all across the country wanted me dead. They’d have to leave my grave unmarked, so that the vigilantes didn’t come to piss on it.

“Listen to me,” I told him. “I didn’t hurt your daughter.”

“I thought about this for so long. It was the only way I could go to sleep at night. I’d think about buying a plane ticket, coming here, finding you.” He opened his hands, gestured to my kitchen. The shattered glass and plates at my feet. The broken chair by the door. “I thought about all sorts of things. About cutting you. Hanging you, for a while. Shotgunning you in the face. I had all these fantasies. They were so real, I could feel them.”

He was suddenly crying. Manic. He pulled his hair, scratched his scalp hard with both hands. Rubbed his face with his palms like he was trying to wake from a dream.

“And now I come here and I find you’re just a fucking man,” he said. “Just like I told myself. You’re just a man.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about. All I could think of was my own survival. I’d heard men talk like this before, about their fantasies falling in a heap, their plans coming undone. In my job as a cop I’d listened to them on the radio, standing in the street looking up at them on ledges, standing just beyond reach of the negotiator. He

was going to kill me. It was all he could do. My lips were so dry I could hardly form words.

“Please. Please listen. There’s a yellow envelope among my papers,” I stammered. “In the second bedroom. I’ve been . . . I was working with a partner. She found some things on the man who really did hurt Claire. Some leads. I haven’t done—I didn’t—”

He stood and I tried to scramble away, got nowhere, curled into a ball, thinking he was coming for me again. But he just turned down the hall and left the house.

There was a shoe by my face, but it wasn't a black boot this time. It was a dirty pink Converse sneaker with wet grass sticking to the shoelaces. A thin ankle covered with tattoos of yellow tigers and wet jungle leaves straining as she stood over me. I felt Amanda nudge me in the side with her other shoe. I made a sound of life.

"Ted! You *are* alive!" she said, but her jubilation plummeted quickly into grief. "Damn it. I just lost a bet with myself."

She leaned on me, and I felt her slip a knife or scissor blade into the cable tie at my wrists. My hands flopped onto the floor, numb and useless.

"Birds," I said.

"What?"

"The birds."

"Oh," she said. "Good point."

She walked away, through the porch door, letting it slam behind her. I lay on the floor and dreamed. I'd taken a few beatings in my time, in prison and out, and I knew the worst thing I could do right now was try to get up too fast.

Amanda Pharrell was my investigative partner, a strange tattooed pixie who could be brilliant in the throes of a case, but annoying as a poke in the eye in equal measure. I'd been working with her since I moved to Crimson Lake, my old life on the drug squad with the New South Wales police long forgotten. I guess you could say she "hired" me; I was technically employed by her private investigations firm, the only other person on the payroll. But our partnership had been more of a beautiful accident, the hand of fate pushing us together. When I fled Sydney, I'd stopped and decided to settle in Crimson Lake by chance. And by chance, there was someone in town who everyone hated just as much as me. It was my lawyer who had put us together, and somehow—I still struggle to understand how—it had worked.

Like me, Amanda was never going to be welcomed back into the loving circle of civil society. She'd stabbed a seventeen-year-old schoolmate to death after the two sat in a car in the rainforest together, about to walk up to a party. It wasn't her fault, but like my crime hers was a one-way ticket out of the "normal" world.

It was Amanda who had brought me a yellow envelope one day shortly after our first case together, a package containing papers detailing exactly what she'd managed to find out about the man who really did abduct and rape Claire. I'd been too scared to look very closely at them. She hadn't pushed me on the issue. It was my decision what I did with the investigation of my own case, and in the weeks that had followed, all the envelope brought me was worry and terror at the possibilities. Maybe if I went looking for Claire's attacker, I'd never find him. Maybe I would find him, and he'd get away. Maybe I'd try to find him, and only further implicate myself somehow, or be unable to prove it was he who'd attacked Claire Bingley. Maybe I'd ignore the envelope altogether, and he'd do it again, and this time he'd kill someone, and that would be my fault. I didn't think any good could come of what was contained in the envelope, no matter what happened.

I heard Amanda thump back up onto the porch.

“How many geese did you have before?”

“Seven,” I groaned, pulling my legs toward me slowly, easing my way up onto my elbows. “Six gray, one white.”

“Yeah, they’re all there.” She sniffed, kicked the porch door closed behind her like she owned the place. “They’re just puffed up. Cranky.”

“I’m pretty cranky myself.” I staggered to my feet. She slipped under my arm and tried to help me to the bathroom, but being so small, she wasn’t very useful. I smeared blood on the doorframe, made footprints on the divorce paperwork my wife had sent me, still unsigned. In the bathroom mirror, my face was awash with blood, one-half swelled so that the eye was a slit between two purple lumps, patterned with a cross from lying on the kitchen tiles.

“What are you doing here?” I asked her.

“I figured something was up,” Amanda said, helping me to sit on the edge of the bathtub. “You don’t go to bed till ten. Weren’t answering your phone.”

“How do you know I don’t go to bed till ten?”

“I’m a supersleuth. An investigative genius. A deductive savant.”

“I might have been out. Had visitors.”

She laughed as she wet a washcloth in the sink. She was right, of course. I went to bed at exactly ten. In prison, lights out had been exactly eight. So I’d extended my sleep time to normal adult hours when I was freed, but I kept to the exact timings because too much free will was still uncomfortable for me. I got up at six. Had breakfast at six thirty. Lunch at midday. I went to my room to go to sleep at exactly 9:45 p.m. and played with my phone until lights out. Nothing else felt right.

“This will need stitches,” she said, touching my face. Amanda had a dozen or more strict rules about working with her, and one of them was that I never touched her. But the longer I’d worked with her, the more she touched me. She seemed to be holding part of my cheek up. “You want me to call that quack?”

I craned my neck and looked in the mirror again. There was a curved five-centimeter gash under my eye, hanging open, revealing raw red

flesh. “That quack” was a coroner I’d befriended who saw to all my medical needs. I couldn’t see regular doctors, attend regular hospitals. Even to buy groceries I had to go two towns over, wear sunglasses and a cap pulled down low, and make sure I didn’t talk to anybody. In and out, breathing deeply and sweating, like a man on a bank heist. Once, I’d been the only face on the cover of every newspaper nationwide. When people recognized me, there were a range of reactions. Men sometimes tried to punch me. Women tended to go all cold, walk away, ignore me until I left. Old ladies shouted and pointed at me. I was terrified of having to see a dentist.

I took the washcloth and pressed it into the wound.

“It’s fine. I’ve got to go. I’m going to catch him before he leaves.”

“Who?”

“The guy.” I looked at my partner. “It was Claire Bingley’s father.”

“No way!” She slapped me in the chest. I winced.

“Way.”

“What are you going to do? You going to bash him? I’ll come.” She punched her palm, her jaw jutted. “I like a bit of argy-bargy.”

“I’m not going to bash him, I’m going to talk to him.”

“Talk to him?” Amanda balked. “About *what*, exactly? The dude just KO’ed you on the kitchen floor. Seems like he might have got his point across. Or are you confused by his message? I can spell it out for you, Ted—he wants you *dead*. He wants to *shred* your oversized *head*. Grind your bones to make his *bread*.”

“I got it,” I said. “But I think I have a right of reply.”

She looked me over, took in my injuries, seemed to assess my chances in another tangle with Mr. Bingley.

“You’re not in a good way.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Your employee health insurance doesn’t cover suicide missions.”

“Amanda.”

“Can you even walk? Did he get you in the nuts?” Amanda cringed in expectation of my answer.

“I don’t know. Everything hurts.” I stood.

“If I finally got hold of the guy who’d raped my daughter, I’d have gone right for the nuts,” she mused. “I’m not sure I’d have used a baseball bat, either. Pair of scissors, maybe. Icepick.”

“This isn’t making me feel better.”

“I don’t know why you’d want to go anywhere near that guy again.” She shook her head. “You got something to say, send an email.”

“I’m going. Help me get cleaned up and get me to my car, would you?”

“You’re stranger than pie, Ted Conkaffey. If you want to go get yourself murdered, fine, but you’re not going anywhere with half your face falling off.” Amanda took me by the shoulders and pushed me back onto the toilet. “I’ll fix it. Have you got any fishing line?”

“Forget about it. I’m not letting you anywhere near my face, with or without fishing line.”

“What, you think I’m gonna mess it up? You’re not a pretty man, Ted Conkaffey.”

“Yes I am.”

“You don’t need to be a doctor to stitch a guy’s face,” she said, lifting my chin, examining the wound. “I’ll do it. It’ll be great. It’ll be very erotic. Like when Val Kilmer cuts his face in *The Saint* and Elisabeth Shue stitches it for him. Urgh, Val Kilmer. *Val Killmerrrr*. I’m sorry. I need a moment.” She sighed and hung her head back, her eyes closed, remembering. Gave a warm, wide smile.

It turns out that a lot of women have stitched men’s faces in movies. Amanda told me all about them, straddling my lap in the bathtub, where the light was best, her breath on my face as she fed the fishing line through my skin with a sewing needle and ignoring my whining. Aside from Elisabeth Shue and Val Kilmer’s soulful interaction in *The Saint*, Rooney Mara stitched up Daniel Craig’s brow in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and Mary Elizabeth Winstead put some stitches in John Goodman in *10 Cloverfield Lane*.

It wasn't all that odd to have Amanda sitting on me, crotch to crotch, jabbering excitedly about erotic moments in movies, neither of us feeling anything remotely sexual. There was nothing erotic about us. In fact, Amanda seemed to have little concept of regular emotions. She was exactly as bright and cheerful about me not being dead as I imagined she'd have been about finding my corpse. She used weird expressions like "stranger than pie" as if everyone should know what they meant. Her social-emotional barometer had certainly been bashed around by her murder conviction, by her decade in prison. But I wasn't exactly sure it had been firing on all pistons before that.

She helped me out to the car and I got on the road, my hands locked on the wheel, everything pulsing with pain in protest to the movement. I should really have been in the hospital. But then, I hadn't been where I was meant to be or doing what I was meant to do in a very long time.

I was working on a hunch that Claire Bingley's father had flown into Cairns to confront me, and that it wasn't the kind of mission that would be extended out so that he could go sightseeing, maybe catch a jumping crocodile cruise. I figured he'd have left my house and gone right back to the airport to catch a plane home. The whole mission seemed badly planned, spur-of-the-moment. He might have seen a reflective feature story mentioning me and snapped. Might have just been thrown out by his wife. Maybe something had happened with Claire. He'd acted out of rage, and now that the deed was done and the dream was broken he'd be running, wondering if I'd called the police, if they'd answer, if they'd be waiting for him at the terminal.

I drove to Cairns airport, speeding all the way, now and then scratching at my bruised nose as blood dried inside my nostrils. I didn't know if I'd find him. It was a terribly long shot. But I'd been too terrified to say what I needed to say at my house, and the man had been too angry to hear it.

I parked in the short-term parking lot and walked across the front of the long, squat buildings, looking in the windows at the empty check-in counters, receiving worried looks from the red-jacketed

receptionists as I passed. The front of my shirt was splattered with blood, and I limped heavily on my left side, one arm hugged close to my body to brace what were probably cracked ribs against the jolting of my steps.

When you've been beat up a few times, as I have, you learn that the best way to manage the pain is to keep moving if you can, even if very slowly. The first time I'd been smacked around in prison—a misunderstanding over some newspapers in the rec room—I'd gone to the infirmary and curled up in the nice, soft bed and surrendered to the blessed desire to sleep. I'd been in general population until my segregation was approved. It was safer to sleep in the hospital there than it was in my cell; the beds were better, the place was cleaner, and there were more guards around. It was so quiet that I'd been able to delve briefly into a fantasy that I was free, outside, in a regular hospital. Big mistake. All my muscles seized up and all the fluids in my joints settled, and I woke up in more pain than when I'd arrived.

When I found Mr. Bingley, he wasn't inside the airport at all, but sitting in a rental car in the hire lot. I spotted the white-blond hair, his head buried in his hands, defeated, just as I'd seen him in my kitchen. I stood nearby for a while waiting for him to lift his face, but he didn't. I went to the passenger-side door and opened it, and when I got in he shuffled violently against the driver's door, grabbing for the handle.

"Wait," I said. I held my hands up, palms out. "Just wait."

He froze, staring at me, wild-eyed. I pulled my door closed slowly, its weight agonizing for my bruised arm. We were sealed in silence, closeness. I fancied I could hear his heart beating, a smashing rhythm that reverberated through the car around us—but maybe it was my own. I carefully pulled the folded yellow envelope out of my back pocket and held it between us, a peace offering wavering over the handbrake.

"You forgot this," I said.

"I don't want anything from you." His jaw was twitching, teeth clamped together. "I need you to get out of this car. Right now."

“This is what my partner has been able to find out about—”

“*Get out of my car!*”

“—*about the man who raped your fucking daughter!*”

Our voices swelled against the roof of the car. Neither of us could look at the other. We sat staring ahead, panting, two passengers in a vehicle going nowhere.

“I did not rape your daughter,” I said after a time, chancing a glance in his direction. “I don’t expect you to believe that until you’ve looked at this.” I threw the envelope into his lap. “I hope you’ll look at it. But I don’t expect you to do that, either.”

He didn’t move.

“Why did you come here?” he asked eventually. “Why did you follow me?”

“Because I want him caught too. Can’t you understand that?” Suddenly I was on the edge of shouting again. Thumping my sore chest. “*I. Didn’t. Do. This.*”

He was stiff, the muscles of his neck pulled taut, eyes locked on the dashboard. His hands were in his lap, under the envelope, one raw, bloody knuckle visible. It was my turn to put my head in my hands.

“I don’t even know your name,” I said.

“How the hell do you not know my name?” His voice was a low, dangerous monotone. “How did you not recognize my face?”

“Because from the moment I was arrested I was in terror for my fucking life,” I said. “I lost my family. I lost my job. I lost my house. I was put in chains and thrown in prison with a bunch of psychopaths. My own colleagues interrogated me. *My friends.* The whole world was upside down. My brain didn’t have room for you. Or your wife. Or your daughter, for fuck’s sake.”

He shifted at the mention of the child. I took a breath and continued carefully.

“I saw Claire for a few seconds on the side of the highway that day, and *I never saw her again.* You understand? I had no idea who she was. I didn’t even remember seeing her, in the beginning. All this has been just a fucking *idea* to me. It never actually happened.”

I stared at the side of his head. I wasn't sure he understood at all, or if he even should. Long minutes of silence passed.

"My name is Dale," he said eventually. "Now get the fuck out of this car."

I got out and shut the door, stood there wondering if there was anything else that I could or should say. But there wasn't. I walked away and left him.

Dear Diary,

Is that how you start one of these things? Dear Diary? I've never had a therapy journal before, and to be honest I'm feeling a bit stupid about it. The whole "dear" thing makes it feel like I'm writing "to" someone, but Dr. Hart assures me that no one will ever read this. Not even him. The whole point is that I use it to be aware of my illness, bring my addiction out from under the shovelfuls of dirt I've been habitually heaping onto it for the past decade. Uncover it. Hold it in my hands, so that I can understand it somehow, maybe one day find the strength to put it aside. The whole problem is, I guess, that he thinks I'm uncovering and holding up and examining something relatively harmless here. I'm starting out my "therapy journey" with a lie. I've told him I think I am a sex addict, which he's surprised by, me being twenty-five and all. He doesn't see anything wrong with a guy my age thinking about sex all day long. He was confused by my deep shame, my terror at even coming to see him. But, in truth, Dr. Hart has no idea of the nature of the thing I'm really talking about. The thing that follows me, the friend I made when I was about fifteen, who I didn't know would be right beside me for the rest of my

life. I'm not sure he would treat me if he knew what I really was. There's doubt in the psychological world that you can even treat people like me at all.

My first therapist wouldn't even try.

I went to my mother once and asked her to take me to a psychologist. She was standing in the kitchen stirring a pot of stew, losing herself in the motion of it, her eyes downcast and cheeks rosy from the steam coiling all around her, pretty and slim in her nightie. I'd been floating around for a little while thinking I should ask the question. Loitering, trying to work up to it. I picked some bacon out of the rice in the pot next to the stew and Mum glanced at me, cheeky, told me there wouldn't be any left if I kept going. It was hard to bring her down from the dreamy place she went to when she cooked, created things. She used to sculpt back then. I'd watch her for hours in silence, her slick fingers moving over the slimy gray clay.

In the end, I just filled my lungs with air, counted to three, and did it.

"I think I need to talk to someone," I'd said. "A counselor."

"Kev." Her brow had dipped, eyes shooting to mine from the work before her. "What? What do you mean?"

Her face was a picture of confusion, flickering with panic, the sculptor who sees a wet vase leaning, sliding, who can't understand why it won't hold its body like the rest of the identical vases she'd spun, sitting straight on the kiln shelf like soldiers. She was the chef who smelled burning but couldn't see it, the expectant mother who feels an odd twinge in her belly, the baby shifting suddenly as though stung. What's wrong with my creation? Or, more accurately, what have I done wrong here? It hurt, to both tell her and not tell her, to make up some tale about being depressed and sit silently all the way to the cold, quiet psychologist's office without any explanation for her about what she'd not given me, what she'd not said, which moment she hadn't been "present" that had left me in this state—unable to share with her at all why this clay pot had cracked.

I'd sat in the shrink's office gnawing my fingernails and examin-

ing the certificates on her walls while she stood out in the hall with Mum, reassuring her that prepubescent depression was normal and that she'd probably be able to find the cause of my distress within a couple of sessions. That it wasn't likely I'd need to be medicated, but it was an option. There'd been some talk of statistics. Of limiting my TV time and increasing my vitamin intake, making sure I got to sleep at a reasonable hour. When the psychologist had come in and shut the door, I'd watched her carefully as she walked to the other side of the desk, smoothing down the sides of her neat black bob, as though she couldn't possibly chat without knowing every hair was in place.

"Kevin, why don't you tell me a bit about yourself?"

I'd told her exactly that. A bit. I'm looking back on myself now, on my teen introduction, and smiling. I'd told her about the books I was reading and the video games I was playing, and about my best friend Paul and our bikes. She'd asked me if I was being bullied. How my grades were going. If I was drinking. All the normal sources of a young person's despair.

I'd been just about dripping with sweat by the time I got up the courage to tell her. She was leaving me long, gentle silences, trying to build me up to it, letting the ticking of the clock on her desk mark the seconds that I had left in the session to spill my guts. I licked my lips and looked at the floor, and when I spoke it was over the top of her as she was posing her next question to me.

"I think I'm a pedophile," I said.

Her mouth was still formed in a small, tight O from saying "Do you . . ." the way she'd been saying "Do you . . ." since we started the session. Do you enjoy getting outside the house? Do you spend much time with friends? Do you ever get angry? But now there she was, stuck on the edge of that "Do you . . ." because I'd done all the things she'd asked me if I'd done, and now she realized it wasn't about what I did at all. It was about what I was. She sat back in her seat and looked at me, and her mouth for a moment turned downward, making the muscles in her throat pull tight.

"What do you mean, Kevin?"

The words were tumbling out of me now. I was hardly drawing a breath between long, rambling, stammering sentences. I could feel the heat climbing up my chest, into my neck, a burning rash that lit the rims of my ears on fire. She listened, hands hanging by her sides, lips slightly parted. I was panting like I'd been running.

"What sort of pictures?" she asked. "How did you find them?"

I'd told her about the pictures. My very first foray into my addiction that was not entirely contained within my brain, actual images I'd been sent from someone in an AOL chat room. How I'd clicked from picture to picture, link to link, video to video down a dark staircase into the bowels of the internet, to places most people didn't even know about. I told her what the pictures were of, described them all in details I knew perfectly from lying in the dark staring at them on my laptop screen beneath the blankets of my bed, terrified that someone might come in and see me with them if I wasn't covered up. I told her how terrifying and exhilarating it had been to see the images of the things I had been thinking about on the screen, like I'd somehow opened a window into my own mind. The things I'd been imagining, that I'd been sure were impossibilities, depraved fantasies, had actually happened somewhere in the world and someone captured it and now I could see it whenever I wanted, as many times as I wanted. I was Dorothy opening the door on Munchkinland, everything suddenly in color. I told her about how great that made me feel.

And I told her about how awful that made me feel.

How sick and wrong and vile a thing I knew I must be to think about these things and feel relief that they weren't just inside me.

"I don't want to do those things," I said. I was hugging myself now, trying to stop myself from shivering. "I . . . I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know why this is happening. I've been wanting to ask someone like you what I should do, you know? I mean, should I be looking at these things? If I'm looking at these things being done to these kids, that kind of means I don't have to do them

myself, right? I mean it's not like what those people did was okay. But . . . But it's like, if they do it, then I don't have to."

I was rambling, pleading, and she could see that. But as I kept talking, her face was becoming redder and redder, and a thin sheen of sweat was starting to pop up at the edge of her hairline, on the short, fine hairs that receded to fluff on her brow. And then she did the last thing I thought she would do.

She got up and went out into the hall and brought my mother into the room.

And I sat there and listened as she told my mother everything that I'd just said.

I promised my mother as she sat in the car crying and thumping the steering wheel that I was going to stop looking at the pictures, stop thinking about little children, stop doing those things to myself in the dark and wondering what the hell was wrong with me. Because yes, there was something wrong with me. I knew that. I knew it was wrong. And I was finished with it. I'd got it out of my system, talking to the therapist. It didn't matter that the therapist wouldn't see me anymore, had said that she couldn't treat me. I reassured my mother that there wasn't a problem anymore.

Lies.

It has been ten years. My problem has never been worse.

I acted on my desire for the first time.

I got awkwardly out of my car at the crime scene, the faces of four or five uniformed officers turned toward me, and each was completely unreadable. The police in Crimson Lake had mixed feelings toward me. For all they knew I was guilty of attacking Claire Bingley, a dangerous pedophile running wild on their beat, an imminent threat to the children of their town. To them, I'd thumbed my nose at the justice system—every breath of free air I took was a personal insult. And then there was the fact that I worked with Amanda Pharrell, who'd been cheeky enough to get herself approved for a private detective's license despite the killing in her late teens. She'd been a juvenile when she stabbed Lauren Freeman and, having served her time, she'd successfully convinced a panel of experts that she could and should be approved to investigate crimes on a private contractual basis. To the Crimson Lake cops, Amanda moving in on the law enforcement game in the very same town where she'd committed the murder of one of their high school golden girls was just rubbing salt into the wound. No one here was ever going to accept Amanda Pharrell, or me. We were utterly alone together.

Police and private investigators are always at odds anyway; people

only hire us because they believe, however truthfully, that the cops aren't doing their job. It also didn't help that I actually used to be one of them. I had spent five years as a drug squad detective back in Sydney. Pictures of me in uniform had been circulated by the newspapers during my trial, smiling broadly when I graduated the academy, frowning sternly as I put a pimp into the back of a police car. I was a traitor to the force. The ultimate insult.

It should have been all-out war between the Crimson Lake cops and Amanda and me, but things were not that simple. On our first case together, Amanda and I had solved a murder. This put one of the Crimson Lake police department's only unsolved homicides back in the black. The Crimson Lake cops hated us—but they also owed us.

They stood now beneath the sprawling branches of a two-hundred-year-old fig tree dripping with Spanish moss, immaculate uniforms, shining boots. The Barking Frog Inn had been almost completely consumed by the rainforest at the edge of the creek. A tangle of poisonous vines with furry sprouts crept up over its wood-paneled walls and across the corrugated iron roof, a blanket of green making it seem as though the bar had popped up from beneath the earth, a trapdoor spider's lair exposed with glowing window eyes peering out. Some brave spirals of native wisteria had joined the fray along the porch rail, but its cheerful purple blooms were struggling under the grip of the weeds and were browning at their tips, thorns piercing new branches, dripping sap onto the boards.

The officers attending the scene had festooned blue and white police tape across the entryway to designate the inner cordon. There was an older, gray-haired man pacing the edge of the outer cordon, head down, watching his feet. As I crossed the dirt road and ducked under the tape of the outer cordon Amanda appeared from the side of the bar in denim shorts and a faded cotton singlet. Her only forensic efforts were a pair of cotton booties over her sneakers and a cap of the same material pulled down over her shaggy black and orange hair. She'd called me that morning and given me the address, waking me from a painful half slumber on the couch on the porch. She came to

me and inspected the work she'd done on my slightly less puffy and bruised cheek. In the dim light of the cloudy morning her scars were obvious, running down her arm and shoulder, along her lean legs, crossing hundreds and hundreds of individual tattoos, slicing through inked faces, cutting objects in half. A crocodile had tried to make her its evening meal once, and now her colorful body was cracked with these baby pink lines and cracks. She was fun to look at, Amanda.

"Did you catch up with the prize fighter?" she asked.

"I did." I walked with her to where her yellow bike was leaning against another ancient tree. "I gave him the leads you gave me. He can do what he wants with them."

"That was pretty ballsy."

"Well, I've still got 'em. Might as well use 'em."

"He didn't try to thump you again?"

"I think he might have, if I'd pressed any harder," I said. "What's this all about?" I gestured to the officers under the tree, the shadows of more inside. I didn't think there were this many cops this side of Sydney.

"Happened this morning, about three, they think, though we don't have any ear or eye witnesses. Last text message from one of the victims was at two forty-seven a.m. telling Dad he was just about to head home."

One of the victims. All Amanda had told me that morning was that people were dead inside a bar, not how many. I could have been about to walk in on a full-scale massacre or a lover's spat gone wrong.

"Who's hired us?" I asked. Amanda nodded over my shoulder at the stocky man with gray hair standing by the outer cordon, looking at the bar. As we walked toward him I recognized the stranglehold of grief on his otherwise powerful frame, the shoulders hanging and arms limp by his sides, all the effort he could muster going into keeping him upright. I knew the feeling, the incredible weight on the back of the head, as though the hurt has lodged there like a lead ball in the back of your skull. I put my hand out.

"Ted Collins," I lied.

I got the impression that this man's handshake would usually have been firm, masculinity-driven. It was limp and cold now. He had hard hands and a trucker's build, hours lifting and sitting, the shoulders strong and the belly round. His eyes were puffed from crying.

"What happened to you?" he asked dimly, offering no name of his own.

"Car accident," Amanda covered for me. "Ted, Michael Bell here has brought us in—his son is inside."

"I'm so sorry," I told Michael. I looked around the empty parking lot. "Isn't there anyone who can come and be with you right now?"

"My whole family is at the house." He glanced away, distracted. "I can't . . . I can't be there. Not while Andy's inside. I just walked off. There's too much crying. Too much . . ." He trailed off, rubbing his beard, the thoughts swirling. "They called me this morning, to confirm I was home. Six o'clock. You get a phone call from the police and you don't know what they want and then they come to the door . . ."

He drew a shuddering breath. I wanted to hug the big man but I didn't know how he or the cops nearby would react. Now and then, flashes of rage crossed his features, lightning cracks there and then instantly gone. I knew from delivering the news of deaths to loved ones as a cop that the rage could leap out at any moment, bursting through the grief like a fireball.

"I saw the stories about you both, the Jake Scully case," Michael offered. My stomach twisted. He must have known then who I was, what I had been accused of. That I wasn't "Collins" but "Conkaffey": the notorious. "I need . . . I want everyone on this. I need to know what happened. The cops, they fuck this kind of shit up all the time. You see it on the news. Missing evidence and corrupt officers and . . . and . . ." He gestured uselessly, hand flopping by his side. "Whoever has done this, I need to know. I just . . ."

"We'll do everything we can," I said. I didn't know what exactly had happened inside the bar, but what this man needed now were assurances. "But I've got to warn you, Michael, that hiring private investigators this early—you run the risk of putting too many cooks

in the kitchen. We're not going to trample all over the police investigation." I looked at Amanda, making sure she knew I was telling her also, not just Mr. Bell. "Mate, I really suggest you go home, or you call someone to be here with you."

"I'm fine," the father said, shifting from foot to foot, already beginning to retrace his pacing path at the edge of the cordon. "I'm not leaving Andy."

I followed Amanda under the police tape to the door of the bar. The large room was packed with people, most of them looking in on the empty bar and kitchen area, a forensic staff-only zone. As I appeared, most eyes turned toward me, examined my bruises, the dried blood that I couldn't seem to fully expel from the rims of my ears. Everyone had donned a Tyvek suit from a pile on a table by the door. I stopped and grabbed one, pulled it on, my face burning with the quiet scrutiny of dozens of people.

There were officers around who looked like they wanted to come and stop us entering the scene. A woman in a suit approached and pulled back her hood. I braced myself for the speech from the lead crime-scene officer about how Amanda and I weren't wanted there, about how insulting it was for a victim's family to bring in private detectives without giving the police half a chance to fuck it up. But I was surprised by a familiar face. Officer Philippa Sweeney had been Holloways Beach police when I first met her, a beat cop tasked with watching over my house six months earlier when a mob had assembled outside it, shouting and carrying on over my arrival in their town. She turned a heart-shaped face up toward me, and I was glad to see it wasn't creased with jurisdictional fury.

"What happened to you, Conkaffey?"

"Slipped on a banana peel."

"Right." She smirked. "I'm the lead on this case. Detective Inspector Pip Sweeney. I was on protection detail at your house a while back."

"I remember." I shook her gloved hand. "That's a swift upward turn in the career trajectory."

“Yeah, well. Seems there were a couple of openings in Crimson Lake for sergeant suddenly.” The corner of her mouth tightened, just slightly, with a smile. She didn’t want to thank me. Couldn’t. “I took the exam and they rushed me through.”

“Nice work,” I said.

“Mmm.”

“Look, it’s very unusual, us being hired this early,” I said. “I’ve already said as much to Mr. Bell. But I’m happy to go and talk to him again, tell him that you guys need to lead and we’ll come in afterwards if there is anything we think we can assist on.”

“He’s in shock,” Sweeney said. “It’s been three hours since he learned his son is dead. He’s grabbing at straws. I’ve seen it before. You tell someone the news and before they can do anything else they go hang the washing on the line. I’m not insulted. I think he’s had a kneejerk reaction.”

“Right,” I said.

“But I’m not going to tell you guys to shove off right away,” she said. “Get a look at the scene. Make some calls if you want. If it makes Michael Bell feel better to have you here I’m not going to argue.”

She turned and pulled her hood on. I did the same, gave Amanda a quizzical frown. Sweeney’s attitude was far beyond what I had expected. I’d expected to be turned on my heel and shoved right back out the door, but instead I found myself following Sweeney to the edge of the bar area where the crowd was thicker and a photographer’s flash was bouncing off the walls. Sweeney was letting us in, but she clearly didn’t trust me. She had the restless eyes of someone trying to decide whether they can turn their back on a dangerous animal, constantly searching my face when she didn’t think I noticed.

There were two bodies visible from the door to the kitchen. A brown-skinned woman had been lying on her stomach when she was shot in the back of the head, her jaw still resting against the dirty tiles. Her hands were flat, palm down, sitting either side of her head, which was turned away from me. A man I assumed to be Michael’s son Andrew had been shot multiple times just before the entrance to

the back door and had dragged himself a little way, painting the floor in jagged streaks as he went for the exit and was shot again. There were footprints in the blood, one set, it looked like, but this could have been from whoever discovered the bloodbath. A photographer was getting a close-up of the woman's face.

"That's Keema Daule, twenty. Over there is Andrew Bell, twenty-one," Amanda said, looking at her notes.

"Christ." I winced. "They're just kids."

Hearing me say the word "kids" sent a ripple of uncomfortable looks around the people in earshot. There are certain things I can't mention as an accused pedophile. Children, toys, schools. I've talked about cartoons in public and made people shift uncomfortably in their seats. It never wears off.

"Are they a couple?" I asked.

"No," Sweeney said. "He's got a girlfriend. Local girl, Stephanie. Keema here is over from the UK recently, been backpacking her way around the country. Mum's of Indian heritage but Keema's lived her whole life in Surrey. We're making calls liaising with the Surrey cops. They're going to go around there and give them the news."

"Who found them?"

"Delivery guy coming in with frozen chips." Amanda looked at the ceiling. "Terry Hill. Local guy. Andrew is usually here to let him in in the morning. He knocked at the front, no answer. Came round the back, looked in the back window and saw a foot. Called the ambulance. Thought someone might have fainted."

At the back of the kitchen beside a shelf full of blackened pots and pans there was a tiny barred window, greasy from the kitchen air. The angle looked right. Around the side of a bench, the delivery man would have been able to see only Andrew's splayed foot and nothing of Keema.

"Someone interview him?"

"Yep."

"So what are the current theories?" I wondered.

"Most popular vote is it's a stickup," Amanda said. "Someone comes

in, trying to hold up the bar. Tells the pair to lie flat on their stomachs like she's doing." She pointed to the dead girl. "Keema and Andrew think they're going to be tied up while he raids the safe, probably. Instead he executes her. *Bang*. Andrew freaks out and tries to make a run for it. He gets it next. *Bang, bang*. He doesn't go down right away. Keeps trying for the door. He cops the rest of the clip for his troubles. *Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang!*"

Amanda had her fingers out in a pistol shape, pointing at the body by the door, one eye closed for aim. People were staring at us. I pushed her hand down.

"What do you think?" I asked Sweeney.

"The setup works," Sweeney said. "Cash register and safe are empty. Safe was full from the week's takings, about to be emptied today. So it was a hell of a convenient time for someone to come in and knock it off. We're rounding up all current and ex-employees."

"Bit of an odd thing to do, kill them both, if it's just a robbery." I looked at the girl's limp, inward-turned feet. I ducked to get a better view of her face. There was a flashy necklace in the blood at her throat. "Why shoot them? Did they recognize the robber?"

Neither woman answered.

"Anyone weird hanging around the bar before closing time?"

"We're bringing in the last customer, Darren Molk, a Holloways Beach postman. His was the last transaction on the readout of the EFTPOS machine, and he says he was the last to leave. We're going to see if he saw anything strange. He's a regular. Apparently it was just Darren for the last half an hour or so before closing. Usually went like that."

"What time did Darren say he left?"

"About two a.m."

"Two?" I said. "That's odd."

"Why?"

"I worked in bars while I was at uni," I said. "Tough work. Takes a long time to close a bar down for the night. You've got to wash and polish all the glasses. Do the mats. The kegs. The fridges. Put all the

chairs up. Do the floors. It sucks. You think the night is over when the last customer leaves and then you're there for ages trying to get the place cleaned up."

"What's your point?" Sweeney asked.

"Well, if they'd only had the one customer since one thirty a.m., why didn't they start the closing process then so that when the guy left they could just about walk out?" I shrugged. "Why hang around for forty-seven more minutes than you have to?"

"Maybe they had staff drinks," Sweeney said.

"What? Just the two of them? Together?"

"Men and women can be colleagues without being romantically involved," Sweeney offered.

"We better hope so." Amanda nudged me in the arm.

"I'll talk to the owner," Sweeney said. "They might have been part-way through cleanup. We'll see what the routine was, how long it usually took. Whoever was waiting to hit the place might have been thinking the girl would leave and Andrew would stay behind to lock the door. Got a surprise when it looked like they were going to walk out together."

It could have been a robbery, easily. Guns were right for robberies. If both had been stabbed, I might have thought differently. Just because they were both dead, that didn't mean it was something personal. One of them might have seen the robber's face, or recognized his voice.

I'd had a few murder-robberies in my time on the drug squad, rival gangs going into each other's houses and blowing each other away, stealing their stashes. A few times it had been over women, or territory, or insults. The good thing for me had been that as soon as my team walked in on a murder, we walked right back out again. Handed it over to homicide. Sometimes I didn't even see the bodies, didn't bother entering the scene in case I messed up evidence. So bodies and death were still foreign to me. I hadn't worked up the desensitization I was obviously going to need as a private investigator, and I wasn't blessed with Amanda's empty toolbox of emotions. I was feeling a

little upset at the sight of the dead young people, so I moved off to check out the rest of the place.

I walked along the bar and into the small staff office where another forensics officer was taking prints from the safe. The roster for the night showed Keema and Andrew were the only people on for the evening. It was a Tuesday night. That seemed about right to me. A chef named Ben had left at nine. I noted where he had signed out for the evening. Amanda was correct—Keema had clocked off at 2:45 a.m. Andrew hadn't signed off at all. The register would give the police a picture of how many customers they'd served. There was a CCTV system, but it was old. I pushed open the flap with a gloved fingertip and found the video tape slot empty. The fact that they were still using VHS to tape the bar's goings on wasn't a surprise to me. The bar was ancient, with running repairs visible everywhere. A piece of wood kicked off the bottom of the bar, replaced with a strip of ply. The cracked corner of a mirror held in place with sticky tape. If it wasn't broken, these people didn't replace it, and if it was broken they fixed it cheaply.

There was a photograph pinned to a corkboard of a bunch of young people hanging out on the porch of the pub, back when the wisteria was in its infancy. There didn't seem to be anyone over the age of twenty-five who worked here, spare for an old woman with heavy jeweled earrings who I guessed was the owner.

Two young people dead on the floor of a shitty dive bar, their faces in the grease and grime of a tiny kitchen. Their deathbed was run by underqualified short-order cooks who'd left after dinner service without so much as a sweep up of the dead cockroaches under the sticky counters. It was such a waste.

Bartending had been a tougher job than I'd thought it would be when I started out in the industry as an eighteen-year-old. I'd been sucked in by the apparent glamour of the pubs and clubs in Sydney's CBD, the thumping music and the drunk girls flirting with the fit young guys behind the crowded counters. The illusion wore off pretty quickly. I finished work in the early hours exhausted and reeking of

cigarette smoke, my feet sore and my ears ringing with the same soulless tunes thrumming out from the DJ's stand over and over. The girls flirted with me, sure, but they were half as charming when I was tired and sober as they seemed when I was on the serving side of the bar. For every long-legged beauty who tried to get free shots from me there were four angry men who felt overlooked in the line and let me know it in no uncertain terms. The vomit and piss all over the bathrooms, swimming with cigarette butts and used condoms, were suddenly my responsibility.

No one was supposed to work in places like this for very long. It was a place for backpackers to drop in and grind out some cash to fund their way north toward Thailand, a place for locals to dwell for a while before they laced up their boots and got out into the real working world. This filthy, rotting place was supposed to be a launch pad only, a rest stop on the way to better things. The only people who were supposed to dent its benches and bar stools would be the local drunks and long-haul truckers who'd already given up on young people's dreams. The small ghosts of Andrew and Keema would be out of place here in the silent hours. They'd be confused, bright-eyed spirits still wiping the counters and changing the kegs, so unprepared to be dead that they didn't even know that they were. I held the photo of the young people drinking on the porch and felt sad.

Sweeney appeared beside me, her face still quizzical.

"How's your case?" she asked. I remembered her trying to ask me questions about my arrest back when I first met her. I didn't want to be interrogated on it now, standing by the cooling bodies of two kids. So I just shrugged.

"Is that what this is about?" She looked at the gash in my cheek. "Are vigilantes still messing with you?"

"No," I said. "It was just a pub fight over something stupid. A snooker table. It's fine. It's all fine. Thanks for asking."

I tried to move away, went to the front porch and stood looking at the wall of rainforest across the road behind my car, a tall, impenetrable tangle of green. Someone had finally come to join Michael Bell,

another graying, rough-edged man who was trying to cajole him into a car. Sweeney followed me, pulling off her latex gloves.

“Amanda will be your only contact from our end for a couple of days,” I said, gesturing back inside to where my partner was raiding the bar for cigars. “If you decide to let her interview victims, don’t leave her alone with them for too long. She’s about as subtle as a kick in the face. I wouldn’t leave, but I’ve got to head down to Sydney for a couple of days. It’s my daughter’s birthday. I can’t cancel.”

Sweeney nodded gravely. Whenever I mention anything to do with my daughter, people do that, nod gravely, like she’s dead. There were press vans turning up outside the bar now, officers directing them away from the parking lot, where they were trying to photograph tire tracks. I prepared to do the old duck-and-run to my car before they cornered me for an interview I couldn’t give.

“I’ve been listening to the podcast,” Sweeney said suddenly.

I stopped. Exhaustion swept over me.

Toward the end of my first case with Amanda, a group who believed in my innocence had formed. It had started with a journalist named Fabiana Grisham, who’d come to Crimson Lake to pursue me for her newspaper. She’d expected me to be the sniveling, bent-backed, hand-wringing child predator of her nightmares, but she’d been struck by how normal I was, as most people are. She’d started asking me questions about my alleged crime, and I’d had answers for all of them. After a while I turned her around.

Fabiana had gone back to Sydney and started an organization called Innocent Ted, which had a website, a podcast that chronicled the crime and speculated over the evidence, and a few videos on YouTube. As the group grew, the media took interest in it and they insinuated that Fabiana and I had been romantically involved.

She’d been punished for it pretty badly in the court of public opinion. People were calling her a pedophile sympathizer, a traitor, a conspirator. The more sympathetic of Fabiana’s detractors mused that she probably had *hybristophilia*, a fixation on sexual partners who have committed violent acts like murder or rape. She’d had a few bricks

through her front windows, like me. But much of the backlash went to her social media profiles, where people threatened and stalked her, sent her obscene photographs, hacked into her personal accounts and published her correspondence.

I did not need to drag someone else into that kind of mess.

“Have you listened to it?” Sweeney asked.

“No.”

Of course I hadn’t listened to it. The podcast was the last thing in the world I wanted to listen to. It had real audio from Claire Bingley’s interviews with police, which I’d heard during the trial and sometimes heard even now in my nightmares. The podcast contained recorded snippets of my own interrogations, my desperate pleas with my colleagues. It had detailed reports from the doctors who’d examined Claire, cataloguing the injuries she’d suffered. It had audio from the frantic, tearful public appeal Dale and his wife made the evening of her disappearance. It made me sick just thinking about it.

“It’s pretty good,” Sweeney said.

“Pretty *good*?” I asked. She didn’t notice my disdain.

“I’m up to about episode five, I think. They’ve gone all the way through the crime, the witness accounts, the interviews. They’re pointing out the inconsistencies. They have some pretty compelling theories.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s the number one podcast in Germany, you know,” she said. “They have eight million subscribers over there. Do you interact with *Innocent Ted* at all?”

“No.” I cleared my throat in what I hoped was a dismissive way, trying to end the discussion. “The woman who started it copped some real problems, so I don’t . . . I don’t want to encourage it.”

“You don’t want to encourage it?” Sweeney squinted at me. “But these people think you’re innocent.”

“I know,” I said, trying to resist the anger swirling up from the pit of my stomach. “And that’s great. Really. But I don’t want to draw any more attention to myself, if it’s all the same. I’m sure the podcast

is very entertaining. But as long as I'm free, I just want to live my life quietly and try to get past everything that's happened. People going around wearing *Innocent Ted* T-shirts and commenting on the website isn't going to give me my marriage back. Or my job. Or my relationship with my daughter. It's not going to replace the time I spent in prison. Or help Claire Bingley recover from the attack. Or give her parents *their* marriage back. Or . . .”

“I get it,” she said.

“Or convince people who have already decided that—”

“Okay, okay! I get it.” She touched me on the shoulder. I found that my fists were clenched. When I unclenched them, my knuckles cracked. I kept my eyes fixed on the rainforest. It was getting scary, my desire to go off on long rants like this, my words speeding up, slurring into each other.

The anger had been a long time coming. When I first got out of prison, I'd been too tired and relieved to be angry. But these days I was angry at everyone, even people who sympathized with me. My goose-wife didn't mind my bleating on and on about my problems, but I'd have to tone it down in front of humans if I wanted to maintain the few people I had who were willing to listen to me at all.

After a time Sweeney spoke, and her voice was small. Uncertain.

“It might help catch the guy who did it, though, all this,” she said. “If you really didn't do it.”