

# Blood Prize

By

Ken Grace

Published by

**M@KTUB** *it is written*

[www.maktubitiswritten.com.au](http://www.maktubitiswritten.com.au)

First published in 2014

Copyright © Ken Grace 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Maktub It Is Written

Freeburgh VIC

Email: [info@maktubitiswritten.com.au](mailto:info@maktubitiswritten.com.au)

Web: [www.maktubitiswritten.com.au](http://www.maktubitiswritten.com.au)

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available from the  
National Library of Australia  
<http://catalogue.nla.gov.au>

ISBN 978 0 9924265 0 7

Cover photos by Ken Grace

Cover design by Katie Grace

## *Acknowledgements*

Thanks must go to Katie Grace, for her editing and publishing talents and her marketing expertise.

To my wonderful mother and father, Wanda and Arn Grace, who never gave up hope in their son.

To Jenny Bouda, another wonderful woman who never stopped offering her belief, support and knowledge.

To Jane, Michael, Cassie, Adam and Nic Fenton, for endlessly suffering my ideas and for their support.

I extend an extra thanks to Nic Fenton for his expertise in producing the trailer film for *Blood Prize*.

# For Katie

I dedicate this book to a woman of raw courage and loyalty, who never stopped believing. My beautiful wife, Katie.

## Prologue

**P**rofessor Alexander Fox turned and glared at the men behind him, silencing their chatter.

“That’s not a pretty sight, is it, gentlemen?”

He turned and sighed as he looked out over the plain.

*Incompetent bastards. They don’t give a damn.*

His ground-penetrating radar equipment rippled in a vast lake of heat-haze distortion, one hundred metres to the west, with no operator in attendance. He spat a globule of saliva into the sand and faced the two men following him.

“What on earth is wrong with you? We find the remains of a large carnivorous dinosaur and you both go back to the shed for beer.”

The professor tilted his head and stared at them over the rim of his glasses. He expanded his lungs and let out a long resonating groan.

“Get going the pair of you. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

He watched the two men retreat. They shuffled along with bent backs and drooped shoulders, making small clouds of dust as they dragged their boots through the dirt.

“Idiots.”

Finding an unidentified *Tyrannosauropus* species from the late Cretaceous period justified all of the toil and the dollars, yet for some unknown reason, his well-paid moronic staff didn’t bother to inform him. He felt like wringing their necks. A unique find in the Winton region of Queensland rated as a significant story; a tale worthy of a press conference, not a drunken boast from some seedy bar.

As he watched the two men shrink and then disappear from sight, his dark thoughts became a rant; his voice sounding angry and bitter.

“I’m surrounded by a sea of morons. I’ll just have to take over the dig and get this baby out of the ground myself.”

He studied the information sheet that he wrenched from his staff. A layman could have compiled a better report, yet it contained enough information to suggest that the skeletal remains could be dated to at least sixty-five to seventy million years ago and that the creature measured nine metres in length and weighed in at over a tonne. He also determined from the report that the horned skull contained more than eighty curved and serrated teeth, in jawbones that appeared to be longer than any previously recorded specimen.

The professor tensed as he lowered himself into the old steel-framed chair. He proceeded with caution. He knew from experience that the lack of padding exposed several bolt heads that protruded towards his advancing buttocks. After managing some degree of comfort, he

fixed all of his attention onto the high-definition monitor of his Farrow and Fraser imaging equipment.

He began by studying the nature of the subterranean environment.

*There doesn't seem to be anything unusual here.*

He widened the coverage area and recalibrated his equipment. This time he did see something, so he reduced the field of vision, captured the identified target area and magnified it, tightening the images for the best possible focus.

*You're kidding me.*

The professor pulled away from the monitor in confusion. He felt stunned. He tried to stand, but needed the support of the machine to steady himself.

“Bastards.”

He turned away from the screen and glared into the empty horizon, as if daring some offender to come forward.

“What the hell's going on here?”

His staff lived for pain-in-the-arse party tricks.

*Could such an elaborate ruse be possible? No. No, it couldn't.*

He slowed his breathing in an attempt to calm himself. He needed to think, to understand. He wanted to believe what he just witnessed, but how could he? Below where he stood, the ancient rock sheltered a sealed environment that just happened to contain the absolute over-the-top impossible.

*You're a scientist ... Come on man. Act like one.*

The professor forced himself to take another look at the screen and his breathing became ragged. He could see seven intact skeletons in one section of the cavern and something else that he found truly disturbing. To his knowledge, nature didn't produce square containers with precise measurements and especially ones that included handles.

He blinked, shook his head and spoke to the machine as if he expected an answer.

“These are manufactured items.”

He knew his hypothesis created more dilemmas than answers. For one, solid rock surrounded the objects in question.

*How could any kind of manufactured item turn up in a naturally enclosed space?*

This problem required clarity, which meant focusing his brain cells towards some degree of professional comprehension.

He held his breath and rechecked the screen. The images remained precise and clear. Not something he imagined.

“This defies logic ...”

The professor knew that differing perspectives could be deceiving. Two years ago, in 2015, he heard a story about a group of Aboriginals who lived not far from the dig site. In all of their years, this group of people never got the opportunity to experience rain and when it eventually fell on them, after a lifetime of dry, they ran in all directions shrieking, as if the melted sky fell in droplets around them. He knew how they felt.

“Like I do now ... Shit-bloody-scared.”

He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

*Could this be the hand of man or a natural occurrence?*

He knew that God fashioned most of our reality, leaving the rest of creation for humanity. Technical equipment existing in a time-sealed space as old as the dinosaurs didn't fit into either scenario, it just didn't make sense.

The professor rubbed the sting of perspiration from his eyes. His shirt sleeve acting as a facial mop.

*Come on man ... Focus. Start with the skeletons.*

The depth and age of the surrounding sedimentary rock meant that the bodies must be at least many millions of years old; information that went against all teaching from big bang to now.

He considered the skeletal remains to be humanoid in structure with little to no deterioration of the bones; noticing that they lay along the cavern's floor in a perfect row.

*It's a burial site ... Behaviour determined by culture.*

He compared their size against his own.

“Bloody hell ... They're giants.”

At close to four and a half metres in length, they measured more than twice his own height.

*This is remarkable. It changes everything.*

The professor closed his eyes and took in a long slow breath.

He knew what it meant to have giant, technologically advanced humanoid beings existing here millions of years before us.

*Every-damn-thing I've ever believed about where we came from is wrong.*

# Chapter One

**T**om glanced into the murky surroundings of the Old Royal. Ten steps in any direction and a person's features began to disappear and he suspected that this remained the reason for the pub's popularity at five in the morning.

He slowed his breathing and listened.

He could hear fragments of conversation from the shadowy booths along the far wall. He squinted into the gloom and noticed the cautious glances of the occupants.

*Bloody scoundrels ...*

He grinned at his thought; this group of crooks invested in the commodities that didn't find their way onto the London Stock Exchange.

Tom sat close to the rear exit, facing the entrance. He knew the local police often raided late-closing establishments in the hope of raising their wages, so he needed to determine an escape route; a good strategy, except that an attractive female shared his booth and blocked any chance of a speedy getaway.

He didn't know her real name so he called her Jacqueline. Her need for secrecy made him feel a little uneasy, but he liked her anyway, even though the giggling and the constant need for eye contact distracted him.

*No ... Don't make stupid comparisons. Don't even think about it.*

He wanted to enjoy the moment and not have to consider her as a possible partner, which meant judging her; weighing up all of her positive features against the inevitable negatives.

*It's ridiculous. No-one ever weighs up ... I'm not sure I'll ever find her.*

Where other males got off on alcohol or drugs, his one obsession wore a dress. All the men he knew seemed to love football and violence, but he loved women; all women, and especially one very specific kind of woman. He often wondered if he conjured her in his mind, or if God placed pictures of her there; giving him glimpses and clues so he could find her in the immensity of it all.

*Why this constant need? It drives me crazy.*

He didn't understand; only that coming close to any dark haired super-slim women with a certain face and body shape made his physiology change, causing perspiration, trembling muscles and involuntary heavy breathing.

*What kind of dark magic could bring someone to their knees with a glance?*

Unfortunately, his obsession devalued everyone else, which seemed unacceptable when he viewed it logically.

He felt her staring at him so he cleared his thoughts and decided he needed to focus on her; a real being of flesh and blood who deserved his attention, rather than a phantom who drove him insane.

“Tom, can I ask you a personal question?”

He winced, but nodded.

“What do you want? Outta life, I mean.”

Tom looked away from her towards the ceiling to hide his discomfort.

“To be happy, I suppose. What do you want?”

“Money. I’m sick of being dirt poor.”

“The whole world’s poor. Only the Church and the ultra-rich have money.”

“They’re revolting. I hate them. Why do they have everything and I have nothing?”

“The Church controls everything; even our bastard politicians. It’s supposed to be evil to want money.”

“Then why do they have so much?”

“You’re asking the wrong person. I’m as poor as you.”

She pursed her lips and looked away and Tom felt a moment of relief; thankfully, the ‘do you ever think about having a family?’ question, didn’t eventuate.

When she turned back, her smile made him shiver.

“Tom ... Hold me.”

He obliged, wrapping an arm around her soft shoulders and feeling the warmth of her back ease against his chest. He sighed as she turned and raised her face towards his, closing her eyes and slowly parting her lips. Tom accepted the invitation and her kiss felt soft and wet, and full of promise, so he ignored the stale breath and the unruly blond hair that tickled his face.

Her boldness surprised him as she took hold of his hand and began to guide it. He closed his eyes and let her take control, allowing his fingertips to become the sole agent of his understanding of her. He sighed again, this time more loudly, as his fingers fired the language of her body up an ascending pathway to his brain, sending shivers through his body; even his blood felt hot, as it rushed towards his extremities.

Tom held his breath. His hand slid up under the cup of her loosened bra and grasped the weightiness of her breast; the touch of its erect nipple sending shockwaves through the palm of his moving hand.

“Tom ...”

She moaned and placed his right hand under her skirt. He needed no further encouragement. He stroked the inside of her thigh, easing his hand slowly upwards. Her legs parted as he felt the tops of his fingers brush against her panties and the mound of her Venus. He felt the hair bristle against her underwear and the muscles of her right leg clench and unclench, then she stiffened and pulled from his embrace.

Tom followed her movements; she stood with her back to him; patting down her attire.

“Is something wrong?”

She giggled.

“I’ve got to go to the toot. I’m about to burst.”

Tom fidgeted with impatience as he watched her disappear towards the toilet. Every moment waiting for her return, felt like an hour of tension.

He slid across the bench, until his back rested against the wall. This way he could see her coming back, but nothing happened. Ten minutes dragged by and his apprehension increased.

*Where the hell is she? She couldn’t have left, not without a word of goodbye.*

Another ten minutes dragged by and Tom continued to fidget. The idea of going into the female loo didn’t thrill him, but it seemed like the only way to discover her whereabouts.

Tom made a quick decision. He slid across the bench, stood and tried to flatten his own clothing. He remained crumpled and unruly and snorted his disapproval as he turned and walked towards the restroom doorway.

*I felt a connection ... She couldn't have gone.*

After several steps, he noticed someone watching him from a booth beside the exit. He stared back at her wild auburn hair and beautiful face; his stomach contracting as he attempted to hold her gaze. Their contact felt intense and sexual, yet without any sense of flirtation, or attraction. He thought about saying something, but her cruel smile kept him silent. As he turned and walked away, he recognised the sick feeling in his stomach as alarm.

He refocused and entered a hallway with several doors. A sign above the left one read: Hen's WC. Tom felt apprehensive as he reached the entrance. He knocked and called out, but no-one answered. He waited for several seconds before slowly pushing on the door with his index finger. It creaked open.

*Alright. I have to do this.*

Without waiting any longer, he slipped through into a brightly lit room, the harsh light forcing his eyelids to compress; his pupils contracting as he adjusted to the glare.

As he slowly became aware of his surroundings, he began to notice the whiteness of the tiles, and the walls and the ceiling. He also noticed three cubicles against the far wall, a sink with a hand towel dispenser and a waste paper basket to his left.

He walked towards the centre of the room and felt something soft move under his boot. Without meaning to, he kicked the white leather shoe further into the room. Only when he bent to pick it up, did he notice the discolouration. From a crouched position, he could see under the middle cubicle door, to where red liquid pooled out towards him. He could also see two feet; one without a shoe.

Tom ran to the partly opened door. He held his breath and forced his head into the gap. "Jacqueline?"

He stared at her in disbelief. His date lay back against the cistern with her partially severed head resting against the wall; her throat slit wide and gaping; her eyes open, as if she still focused on her killer.

Tom cried out and backed away from her.

"No."

He fell against the door, his back sliding down its surface until he crouched just above the bloodied floor tiles.

A rush of nausea overwhelmed him and he vomited.

Tom's head pounded and his eyes blurred with moisture as he forced himself to rise.

*My God ... What the hell am I going to do?*

He couldn't wait for the police; not around here. It might have been the year two thousand and sixty one, but time didn't change the facts. His piece of London represented extreme danger. In the East End, police dished out their own idea of justice, especially the hated Special Religious Police. Over the years he witnessed so many beatings and even worse; summary executions.

Like everyone in his part of the world, he knew the penalty for disobedience. He hated that neighbours ratted on neighbours. The SRP ruled the streets with networks of informers; exploiting everyone's fear. Billboards everywhere declared that by being above the law, the legal system remained unclogged; keeping gaols from spilling over, but he knew this rubbish meant nothing to the mothers of those that went missing.

*Calm down ... Breathe ... Think.*

He closed his eyes and tried to compose himself, drawing a fitful breath as he took a last look around. He knew he shouldn't leave incriminating evidence at the scene, but survival

took precedence. Then he noticed his reflection in the mirror and balked at the drained face staring back at him. He looked shrivelled and bent; ancient for a twenty-year old.

*I can't believe this. It's ... so senseless.*

The nausea came back; rising with his fear. It felt debilitating and instinctively, he knew he needed to push through the panic. He felt wretched. He looked back at the mirror, clenched his fists and willed his features to transform themselves. He pulled back his shoulders, puffed out his chest and straightened his body to its full height.

Instead of a stranger; a tall young man with unruly blond hair and a gammy elbow stood before him. Would this person be tough enough to survive? The expression on the face in the mirror seemed unconvincing.

As he re-entered the hall and hurried to the rear entrance, he thought about who might have seen him in the bar. He remembered the striking auburn-haired woman and his fear intensified. He couldn't see a solution other than luck. The only plan he could think of required him reaching his parent's house undetected, gathering some gear and laying low somewhere, until he could figure out what to do.

*Tom ... From here on, you need to run.*

He moved away from the pub as quickly as possible, following the network of narrow alleyways that stretched to the south. Darkness and fog made visibility difficult. Despite his urgency, each step required careful attention. Worn soles skated across slippery cobblestones and stumbled over heaped garbage. He slowed. He couldn't compromise his mobility; an injury might prove fatal.

When he reached the first intersection, he heard footsteps behind him and his fear returned. It couldn't be a coincidence. The person following moved at a similar pace and stopped when he stopped.

Tom ran and the muffled sounds behind him paralleled his own. He felt exposed and vulnerable as he reached the first of several lit crossways. He staggered out under the cone of light, with his collar up and his chin on his chest; just another drunk on the way home to his hovel. As soon as he reached the safety of the darkness, he pushed himself against a wall and waited to see who followed him. Someone committed bloody murder and he needed to avoid it happening to him.

*Footsteps ... Keep still.*

Tom held his breath and flattened his body harder against the wall. He saw a shape appear, lurking at the far edge of the circle of light and a man stepped out into the open. His collar stretched up to touch the brim of his hat, hiding any facial features from view.

Tom ran; softly at first for the benefit of stealth, then faster, as he outdistanced the possibility of his hunter hearing the sound of his footfalls. He thought he held an advantage with his knowledge of the alleys, yet that remained an assumption better served by speed. Fear affected his thinking, yet in a moment of clarity, it occurred to him that if the killer knew his identity, could he ever be truly safe? He needed a way to determine what this scoundrel looked like; a place where he could view him from close quarters, yet a place dark enough that the man didn't need to hide his features.

Tom slowed and allowed his pursuer to catch up. An old, barely legible sign marked: 'Lane's End' revealed his chosen hiding place.

His plan depended on this narrow cul-de-sac and he hoped that the man following him didn't know the way over and through.

*Hopefully he's not from around here.*

Most locals knew that this area once contained parkland and little else, but a severe shortage of housing thirty years earlier, turned the place into a shantytown with tiny streets. Over time, the tin dwellings became brick and mortar, but the maze of narrow alleyways remained.

Tom hurried towards the rear wall. He joined his hands around a water pipe and used his arms as a sling, pulling himself up until he reached the safety of the building's roof. He hid himself behind a row of dripping pipes, with enough of a gap for him to see down into the alley and remain hidden.

Down on the street below, the only illumination came from several undraped windows, where local East Enders readied themselves for another day of labour. The uncovered bulbs providing enough light for him to discern the small area of cobblestones and grimy walls, and hopefully the face of a determined killer.

*Keep still ... He's coming.*

Tom noticed movement. A swirling of the mist and a shadow by the far wall, yet his assailant remained hidden, which left him little choice. He must wait until the man made his move, but just as he thought this, the shadow walked into the light and became form.

The man removed his hat and looked up at Tom's hiding spot.

"I know you're up there. I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk."

Tom knew he only needed to slide backwards across the slate for several feet and run along the rooftop to safety, but something about the man in the trench coat caused him to remain.

Tom judged him to be young; maybe only seventeen or so and his voice didn't seem to hold the slightest bit of malice. The lack of any visible blood on his person eventually persuaded Tom to remain.

"Keep your hands out where I can see them and don't move. Then we can talk."

"I have no intention of harming you, Tom. In fact, quite the opposite."

"Yeah right. You knife my girl and follow me out here for a nice little chat?"

"You're half right, old son. Actually, I'm your guardian angel and believe me, you need to be protected."

"Rubbish. Start making sense or I'm off."

The young man below raised his hand, slowly moving it to the pocket of his coat. Just as slowly, he took out an envelope and held it up towards Tom.

"This letter will explain everything. My boss sent me here to give it to you, but then things happened."

"Yeah, you killed her?"

"Nah, not me. I've been outside that bar all sodding night, waiting for you to come out. I only went in when I heard some patrons screaming. When I did, I realised that you'd already left, so I flew out the back and got lucky. You weren't that far ahead of me."

Tom wanted to believe the youth. He needed help, but it seemed far more sensible at that moment to run.

"Who killed her then and why the hell are you so interested in me?"

The young man below didn't answer. He stiffened and raised the forefinger of his right hand to his lips. Tom noticed him take a step backwards towards a darkened doorway and heard two muffled metallic sounds in close succession.

Tom pulled back from the water pipes in surprise, as the young man fell to his knees, moaning and clutching at his side.

"They shot me ... Go ... Get outta here ... Now."

Tom arched his spine and began crabbing backwards on his hands and knees, but stopped when he noticed a flash of movement below him. A figure entered the cul-de-sac with astonishing speed.

Tom's body tightened. The tiniest of movements might give up his position. Only his eyes followed the dark shape, as it grasped the young man's hair with one hand and pushed down with the other; forcing the youth into a kneeling position.

Tom heard laughter. It sounded harsh, cruel and more surprisingly, feminine. He felt confused as he tried to absorb and understand this information.

*What the hell?*

He stared unblinking as the woman wrenched at the young man's hair, pulling his head up and to one side; revealing the neck. She laughed again as she lowered her head and sank her teeth into the exposed flesh.

Tom heard the young man's cries for help and felt his stomach heave. He saw the woman jerking her head from side to side, tearing through the skin, until a chunk of meaty tissue tore from his neck. Then the killer straightened and pulled her victim's head up by the hair; blood pumping from the grizzly wound below his ear.

Tom tensed. The woman looked directly up at him and removed her cap, shaking her curly auburn hair loose around her shoulders. She smiled at him with bloodied teeth and the remaining contents of Tom's stomach exploded out over the side of the wall.

Tom's eyes blurred with tears, but he saw the woman release the corpse, letting it flop onto the pavement. Then she turned and concentrated on the other end of the alley. Tom could see people emerging from doorways and he heard a car's engine rev into life.

"You'll never get away from me. I know who you are. I'll find you no matter where you go."

She smiled up at him, spat a spray of blood onto the cobblestones and vanished into the darkness, as quickly as she arrived.

Tom spun around onto his back and tried to calm himself. He forced extra oxygen into his lungs and attempted an understanding of the night's events. Jacqueline murdered, now this. None of it made any sense at all.

He rolled over and raised himself onto his knees. More lights shone into the alley and he could see well enough to confirm the devil-woman's departure. He knew he needed to run; over the roof, where no-one would see anything. He took a last look down at the macabre scene. The corpse lay face up on what appeared to be a pillow of blood.

*What a waste of life.*

Tom felt disgust and almost turned away when he noticed a tiny portion of white sticking out of the victim's coat pocket.

*The Envelope.*

## Chapter Two

**F**ather Dominico Rossi disembarked from his British Airways flight, thirty-five minutes behind his intended schedule. He tried not to frown or show suspicion, even though he considered the cancellation of his Costa Corporation jet, to be a warning.

He felt even less amused suffering the traffic from Ciampino Airport to central Rome, with an over-talkative taxi driver.

He smiled at the man and it felt as unpleasant, as he supposed it looked. ‘Don’t sweat the small things’; a lesson remembered from his childhood, but enough small things put together make a big thing; his anxiety seemed justified.

“At Rezzale delle Provincie, take the second exit onto Via Catania and this time pay attention.”

“Yes Padre, but as I was saying, my poor Mama ...”

The priest moaned as they turned from Via Francesco Crispi into the heavier traffic of the Via Sistina. As the hotel came into view, he felt his heartbeat increase. Trouble lay ahead. It could mean a step towards success or possible disaster; he didn’t know which to expect.

A nervous looking concierge greeted him on arrival at the Intercontinental De La Ville and rushed him into an austere looking boardroom. He knew the purpose of this space. Every word uttered, every nuance of expression, every movement relating to body language, created a picture of what lay behind each individual mask; allowing little chance of anyone deceiving his employer.

He understood the Church’s need for control and their hatred of science.

*They think it betrays God.*

This justified a world where the average man knew nothing of technology.

*They’re afraid of course. Knowledge is a dangerous thing in the wrong hands.*

Only religious-controlled governments and trusted affiliated organisations acquired permission for technical expertise.

*The Assembly keep their boot heels on the neck of the poor. The amount of money these bastards spend on technical security could feed thousands.*

He started to shake his head, but stopped; realising that Assembly personnel scrutinised his entrance.

*It’s all about control. When the threat of Hell isn’t enough, violence is the next best thing.*

His masters in the hierarchy of the Church believed that mass-produced comforts polluted the world. They admonished the population with proclamations of a future Heaven, in great peril of remaining empty of man for eternity ... Unless humanity became totally obedient to the will of God and as such, His administrators, the Church.

*And, they employ the Assembly and their Special Religious Police to make it happen.*

As he stepped further into the room, he tried to improve on his smile. It seemed fake, yet better than his last attempt. He directed it at the two well-dressed men rising from their seats, holding out hands in greeting.

The chairman and larger of the two, returned his smile and embraced him.

The priest forced himself to stifle a laugh.

Politicians employed the same phoney conviction hugging babies.

Frederick Vogel, the shorter man, returned to his chair and looked away; his welcome being courteous, yet frosty.

As always, the priest avoided staring at Vogel. It required an effort on his part. The man's looks offended him, no matter how often the two men came together. His hair resembled the pelt of a leopard, being close-clipped and red, with several patches of darker hair and two prominent blotches of grey.

The priest risked a glance at the man's angular, sallow face and winced; overall, he considered him a grotesque and dangerous creature.

The clergyman looked away when he spotted Vogel's eyes darting in his direction. He noticed him moving forward on the edge of his chair and despite the obvious animosity, the priest recognised the man's grudging acknowledgement of the hierarchy that existed between them. In Vogel's world of security, he continued to be the Assembly's top man, but here, he seemed cunning enough to know his place, at least for the moment.

The priest turned his attention away from Vogel and attempted to engage the larger man, returning his exuberant expression. Father Dom tried to remain calm; outwardly confident despite the danger. Antonio Costa owned the world's largest private corporation and chaired the Assembly of the True Faith. He dominated everyone with the power of his position and the fear that standing evoked.

"It's been a long time, Dominico. Rome isn't the same without you."

The priest kept his facial features neutral, while his brain once again registered a warning. He knew the tactic. Overdoing the pleasantries kept the quarry from running and as a consequence, at the Assembly's mercy. He played along, stretching his lips into a more convincing smile.

"Now to business, Dominico."

The old chairman ran his fingers through his thinning hair, gathering the strands where they fell to his shoulders. Then in one motion, he swept them up and over his bald peak with the back of his hand.

The priest hid his disgust.

The chairman seemed oblivious to the priest's thoughts, as he captured the last unruly thread from in front of his face. He used both hands to pat the oily mass into place, before turning his attention toward the other seated man.

"Mr Vogel, if you please."

Frederick Vogel coughed and as he spoke, a nerve twitched above his left eye.

"There's been a breach of security. In the early hours of this morning, two different parties approached Fox and an incident occurred. Fox escaped unharmed."

The priest raised both of his arms towards the heavens.

"What? Why wasn't I contacted about this earlier? Who the hell are these two parties?"

Vogel didn't initially respond to the clergyman's questions. The priest noticed the muscles around his jaw, bunch and clamp, and for a brief moment, his teeth flashed between thin, bloodless lips. Then he frowned at the chairman and waited for his barely perceptible nod before answering.

"A member of the PMSG made contact with Fox. They're a group of subversives known as ..."

“The People’s Movement for Secular Government. I know who they are, but that's absurd ... Impossible. Fox is dead, officially and we’ve gone to a great deal of trouble to keep it that way.”

“Well, not enough trouble. Someone eliminated the PMSG contact as well as the girl with Fox. The deaths seemed brutal and purposely obvious; we think it’s some kind of warning, or scare tactic.”

“By who, Vogel?”

“We’ve been unable to determine the perpetrator. No witnesses and nothing left for identification purposes. A professional job.”

“What about Fox? You say he escaped.”

“He’s hiding; safe for the moment.”

The priest squeezed his fingers into a fist to stop them shaking as he struggled to contain his composure.

“This material is for the board’s eyes only, Mr Vogel. Perhaps you’d like to explain, how you’ve become privy to this information and the lad’s real identity, when Fox himself doesn't know?”

The Assembly chairman cleared his throat and both men turned and faced him.

“Frederick has my confidence, Dominico. He runs a plant in the PMSG, a spy who’s helped us in the past.”

The priest studied the chairman’s face and his worry began to escalate.

*Why would the high and mighty, Chairman Costa, answer for an underling like Vogel? Be careful ... It’s another warning.*

“I don’t have to tell you how serious this is, Dominico. Decisions have to be made and quickly, for the good of our sacred order.”

The priest tried to slow his breathing in an attempt to remain calm. This project required absolute secrecy; the responsibility belonging to him since its inception, yet the Assembly Council proceeded without him, preferring Vogel’s murderous skills over his diplomacy. He knew his survival depended on his next words; he needed to be convincing.

“Mr Chairman, I assure you, nothing’s changed. There are only two choices available. You either eliminate the threat by killing Fox, or you take a risk and go after the Prize.”

He glanced at the chairman; the man’s complexion turning as pale as the collar of his crisp white shirt.

*Good. A little stress to push my point.*

“So, what’s it to be? The status quo, or is the Prize worth pursuing at any cost?”

The priest felt his power returning and with it control.

“Tom Fox is the key. His existence alone could destroy us all. Murder him. Throw his mutilated body into the Thames and we can all rest easy. However, if you do this, you will lose the greatest of opportunities. Don’t misunderstand me, Mr Chairman. Right now, Tom Fox is the most dangerous human being alive, but he also represents power beyond all imagining. Use him effectively and you rule everything.”

No-one spoke. The priest allowed the silence to settle around them as they considered their positions.

After several seconds, the Assembly chairman frowned and raised his left eyebrow, creating an expression of disapproval. The priest thought it contrived; his decision already made.

“I believe Fox is the one, we all do, but he’s young and untested. I have your report, Father Dominico, but I’d like to hear your personal assessment of him.”

The priest nodded and tried to relax his shoulders. Testing Fox meant putting him into action with all the possible ramifications that could follow.

“As you are aware, we created surrogate parents for Fox after the death of his own. We used these people to control his childhood development, creating the kind of individual that could achieve our goals.”

The chairman interjected, waving his right hand around in circles.

“Your report indicates that Fox has some dubious sources of income, which you’ve described as illegal. He also seems to be particularly aggressive with little semblance of empathy?”

The priest nodded his head in agreement. He manipulated these reports. More accurately, he lied in every one of them. He achieved this by omitting certain facts pertaining to behaviour. Fox remained complicated. When it came to violence, he reacted in the extreme; aggression returned times two.

At ten years of age, he grappled with a group of young Lebanese migrants who tried to rob him. He fought bravely against five much larger boys and almost died as a result. He received a knife wound on his left cheek, a fractured skull, a deep stab wound to his right buttock and an arm injury, inflicted by a metal bar; the perpetrator repeatedly smashing his left arm and elbow, which resulted in multiple fractures.

The on-duty emergency registrar at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital ran to the point of exhaustion that night. With little to no help, he couldn’t cope with the human flotsam and jetsam from that Friday evening’s fight-club. He stemmed the blood flow and took x-rays of Tom’s skull and arm, but the patient waited a further six hours for treatment on his fractures. The doctor plastered the arm, but didn’t pin it. Tom recovered, but could never fully straighten it again.

The priest sighed as he remembered the damage.

The knife wound to his face healed quickly enough, but it left him with a three centimetre scar, which changed his otherwise gentle appearance; adding a hint of danger.

After that incident, the priest secretly made arrangements for Tom. He just happened to meet a young man known as Jimmy Omagra; an up and coming star in the world of martial arts. They became friends and trained under the direction of the same man; Sensei Martin Omagra – *Fifth Dan*, Jimmy’s father. After seven years of Shorinjiryu instruction, Tom refused to participate in any official events, but reports indicated that he could defeat his friend and every other member of the Dojo, including the Sensei. The priest knew this to be no easy task with Jimmy Omagra recently winning the ‘British Open Karate Championships’, for the eighth year running; rating him second in the world.

*You’re an enigma, Tom Fox.*

Despite being compelled to stand up for himself and others, against any bullies, the priest knew the truth about Tom’s fighting abilities.

*He’s all courage, but, like me, he hates violence. The murder of your parents will do that to a person.*

“Yes, Mr Chairman, he’s as aggressive as we need him to be. He’s ready.”

The chairman nodded and raised the Fox report; waving it at the priest.

“And what about his intellect? You indicate that everything depends on his capabilities and our ability to manipulate him. Some of the information in this report conflicts with those needs. For instance, it says here that he is exceedingly bright, yet his grades over the years don’t support that assessment.”

The priest remained expressionless. The truth regarding Fox’s learning and cognitive abilities remained a significant negative, which might unduly influence the Assembly Council; this he didn’t want.

Early IQ scores rated Fox in the highest echelon of intellect; only a significant brain could produce a score of one hundred and sixty five, yet he continued to struggle academically. The

priest quickly determined the extent of this dilemma; information he never included in any report to the Assembly.

He hired a private psychologist by the name of Doctor Robert James, to determine the specifics. His report showed central nervous system dysfunction in the form of specific learning disorders. He found that head trauma may have caused some cognitive impairment at an early age. A subsequent lack of academic support, from all aspects of his environment added to this situation. He didn't appear to have a problem with input or integration; only the storage and output areas seemed affected. This meant his memory could sometimes cause problems in processing his thoughts into language.

Doctor James classified Fox as having a disorder referred to in an overarching way as Dysphasia, which he classified as a partial degree of impairment. The diagnosis also included Dysgraphia, which explained Fox's inability to spell correctly on one day and not on another, and Anomic Aphasia, which caused him intermittent problems with remembering the names of buildings, movies and frequently used items.

Tom Fox understood the deepest complexities of philosophy and scientific theory, yet on many occasions, couldn't remember the name of a friend.

Doctor James explained that Fox's subsequent emotional, behavioural and social problems might well be a negative consequence of his Dysphasia. He quoted *Zebat & Hibrow (2042)*: In the case of the British prison population and in particular violent inmates; twenty four out of thirty suffered from learning disorders, which were not in any way related to IQ.

The priest closed his eyes and nodded; happy with the summation of his thoughts.

"Yes, Mr Chairman, Fox could be defined as street smart. This is a reflection of his upbringing. His poor results are primarily due to a severe lack of parental reinforcement with regard to academics. I believe his abilities are worth our level of risk. Fox is the perfect conduit to our success."

"Yes, yes, but can we realistically achieve this? Given these current incidents, the board needs to be assured that our goal can be safely accomplished."

"If Mr Vogel's spy has your trust, Antonio, then yes, it can be accomplished and earlier than we'd previously planned. It's an opportunity that we can't easily discard."

"I disagree, Mr Chairman."

Both men looked at Frederick Vogel with surprise.

"This is not an acceptable risk. We must remove this threat at once. These incidents tell us that our opposition are now aware of his worth."

The priest squeezed his lips together. The Assembly's head of security remained a servant in this company. He knew the required protocol, which meant he interrupted with a purpose. Vogel played the opportunist. If he got to Fox first, then he could own the information himself and only God knew what might happen, if that cold-hearted bastard discovered the location of the Prize.

## Chapter Three

**T**om hurried through the thick morning fog and it swirled around him. He could hear people and vehicles, and at times caught brief glimpses of them through the murk. This suited his purpose. He didn't want to be recognised and no-one could follow him.

He continued walking until an imposing red-brick building emerged out of the mist. As he approached, the expansive double archway rose above him with a metal sign attached to the top, which read: 'Squatter's Flat Station'.

Tom remembered the decrepit state of the entrance. Eight years of disuse, scattered clumps of pigeon droppings, and the refuse from countless vagrants, caused a lot of filth.

*Come on, Tom. Keep concentrating, just for a little longer.*

He searched about for the tunnel entrance and any signs of danger. Everything remained the same as his last visit. Old slabs of timber and rusty sheets of corrugated iron covered the doorways, windows and ticketing booths.

He crept towards the east tunnel and tugged at the tin barrier at precisely the right place. It moved just enough for him to push through. He fumbled in the darkness for his miniature Mag-lite, twisted the metal shaft and the tunnel became visible. As he looked around, he realised that his body ached from tension and his brain felt as foggy as the dank environment outside.

He looked up at the dripping walls. Graffiti covered most of the surfaces. Just above his head, a religious slogan claimed God to be a murderous despot, only loving the rich.

He stifled a laugh.

The rich of London acted like Gods, so he supposed it held some semblance of truth. His neighbourhood's only blessings involved violence, depravity and suffering.

Tom found the driest piece of concrete not covered with faeces or broken glass and tried to make himself comfortable. As he lowered himself to the floor, he wondered about that; the idea of being comfortable. It didn't seem to fit with his reality; a double murder, probable gaol and the possibly of his own, violent death.

*Yeah. Very comforting.*

His chest hurt as he sucked in a breath. He tried to stop the unwanted thoughts, but the same images kept returning; his date, Jacqueline and the youth in the long dark coat; their eyes searching, questioning, asking him why.

He took another deep breath and tried to think of something else.

Then he remembered the letter. For the past hour, every time he moved, he felt it like a hypersensitive part of his anatomy.

He removed the envelope from his pocket and brought it out into the beam of his torch. Despite his impatience, he opened it and removed the contents with reverence. As he unfolded the paper, the memory of bloodied teeth filled him with revulsion.

Tom,

My name is Noah. We need to meet. I have something of great interest to you. There is a bookshop near your house, on the corner of Queen's Avenue and Lawrence Street, called Bartholomew's Books. Be there tomorrow at precisely nine in the morning.

If you think to ignore this message, then consider this; you are not and have never been Tom McKnight. That is because your entire life is a lie and I can prove it. Don't be late and don't let anyone follow you.

Tom felt let down.

*Adoption ... Really?*

He couldn't stand his angry, mindless parents. Only the law kept him under their control, forbidding him to leave their care until he reached the age of twenty-one.

Tom allowed the letter to fall to the ground.

*Damned nonsense.*

Killings didn't generally happen over long-standing adoption issues, which meant the deaths must be random and unrelated?

He remembered her words, 'You'll never get away from me. I know who you are. I'll find you no matter where you go.' She knew him. That made it related.

*Why did the woman reveal herself? Hell. Why kill someone for delivering an impotent letter?*

A more pertinent question remained; what could he do about it?

*I can't leave, that's for sure.*

Friends or the ability to sustain himself didn't exist outside of the East End. This left him with only one choice; stay and discover his enemies.

Tom stiffened. He heard a scuffling sound.

He raised the torch, reached out and sought a piece of broken concrete, which he launched in the direction of the noise. A thud and a screech echoed down the tunnel, as the rat scurried for the cover of darkness.

Tom grinned and tried to refocus his thoughts.

*This Noah may have the answers.*

He sent the young man to warn him. He wrote the letter. Despite the risk, Tom knew he must attend the meeting.

## Chapter Four

The priest held his breath as he watched the chairman raise his hand for silence.

“Yes, the danger’s real, Frederick, but I agree with Dominico ... In principle. We are the protectors of our Mother the Church. As such, we cannot forget our sworn undertaking. The return of God’s True Ordained Order for this world is our mission and I believe that Tom Fox is the pathway to that end. That said, if I take this to the Assembly Council, I need something tangible. I need proof of success.”

The priest perceived the chairman’s true meaning.

*If it all goes to shit, the bastard needs someone to blame. Alright, it’s about time I delivered my coup de grace.*

“Let me make myself perfectly clear, Mr Chairman. It can be done and with minimal risk. Our original plan required manipulation and enforced coercion, but the spy in the PMSG presents us with a unique advantage. We can be reasonably sure that this subversive group is trying to recruit Fox. So we use them. We even help them.”

“No. You’re joking. You’re suggesting we help the enemy. They could destroy us.”

The priest felt his shoulders tighten; Vogel’s interjections continued to disregard long-standing protocols and the chairman did nothing.

“Calm down, Frederick. The PMSG are the perfect vehicle. Through your spy, we’ll have the opportunity to instantly monitor all outcomes.”

The priest glared at both men, before continuing.

“We’ll drive Fox into total dependence on them. We can then direct every movement from then on, forcing them to find the Prize for us.”

“And, if anything goes wrong?”

The priest recognised the threat behind the question. Vogel’s hatred for him remained palpable; as obvious as the man’s ambition.

He turned away from the security man and focused his attention on the chairman.

“If anything goes wrong, we can instigate a thorough clean-up operation. We simply utilise Vogel’s spy and eliminate the problem from the inside.”

The chairman adjusted his great bulk and thrust his head forward in concurrence.

“I agree, Dominico, and I’m sure my colleagues on the Assembly Council will also agree. We must find the Prize. However, if we lose control, then Frederick has my full authority to clean-up any mess.”

The three men nodded and exchanged parting pleasantries without conviction.

---

Vogel scrutinised his two superiors as they left the room. He despised them, particularly the priest. He knew both of these men served only themselves. Like him, each grasped at this unprecedented opportunity. Tom Fox remained a treasure beyond reckoning. If he could capture him without the Assembly's knowledge, it would only be a matter of time before he forced the truth out of him.

As he pondered this, a flutter of movement broke his concentration. A Red Admiral Butterfly floated to a stop on the table in front of him.

"How-the-hell ...?"

He watched with amusement, as it flew toward him and landed on the back of his hand. Without any fear, it opened and closed its wings and Vogel noticed the deception in colour; dull brown on the underside, yet the upper portions portrayed markings of white and black, and glowed with vivid red and orange. He coughed out a rasping laugh of appreciation. Like him, this organism chose what personality it presented to its enemies.

"You've defeated my entire security network, little one."

With exceptional speed, he flipped his hand in a clockwise direction and caught the butterfly between his thumb and forefinger. He squeezed and smiled, as the tiny creature's life oozed out between his fingers.

"Nobody defeats me."

He laughed again.

*Fools.*

They thought they owned this game, but he refused to be a servant. When Fox became his, then no-one could stop him ... He'd own it all.

## Chapter Five

**T**om noticed the dilapidated state of the bookshop as he edged his way in past the proprietor. A thick layer of dust covered every surface including the floor, which carried so much grime that it appeared to be natural earth. He couldn't see anyone else inside the building, so he pretended to fill in time, searching through the mishmash of bookshelves that stretched up all the way to the roof.

"Tom."

As Tom tried to turn, he stumbled and pulled several books from the shelf in an effort to rebalance; one striking the new arrival in the side of the head. He looked back at the man as he brushed the dust from his clothing. He expected him to be white. In this world, black men rarely held positions of power.

"You're Noah?"

The man nodded towards the rear of the building.

"Follow me."

Noah turned, swinging his powerful shoulders around in the opposite direction. He moved quickly, despite the beer belly that hung over his bandy legs.

Tom felt anger redden his face.

"No. Not before you tell me who killed her."

The man turned back and frowned.

"Don't stop. Just keep moving to the back. Then I'll tell you as much as I can."

"Yeah, like I'm not supposed to be Tom McKnight?"

"We can give you back your true identity, but from here on your choices become difficult."

"This is such bullshit. My parents aren't real and I'm not who I think I am?"

"Yes."

"Hey look, I'm not worth ripping off, alright. I don't have anything you'd want."

Their conversation ceased, as several people entered the store and sidled their way into the adventure section.

A tense silence fell between them.

Tom held Noah's steady gaze, but allowed his peripheral vision the opportunity to scrutinise the shorter, stockier man. He seemed likable. Streaks of grey coloured his dark hair, which receded above the temples, making his jovial looking face appear bulky. A prominent beak-like nose dominated his features, with large black eyes and long feminine lashes adding a softer contrast. Tom discerned a gentle nature, yet the man's entire persona conveyed strength.

“Alright, lad, let’s get to the point. The people you know as your parents are impostors. They’re not your real family. You were born in Australia. Your mother’s an Aussie and your father’s a Yank.”

Smiling, he held up both of his hands with the palms up and shrugged his shoulders; as if this gesture proved his statement.

“Your pretend father and his sister are illegal immigrants. They’re remnants from a bad time in Ireland and wanted over most of Europe.”

“Brother and sister ...? How do you know this?”

The man handed Tom several sheets of official Europol mug shots. One for his surrogate father and another for the man’s sister; the woman he’d known as his mother. The third sheet contained lists of their unlawful behaviour, including terrorist activities and murder.

Tom felt his face flush. He became aware of a hand squeezing his shoulder and he pushed it aside. Terrorists? Murderers? These words didn’t belong in his world.

“So if they’re not my parents, then who is?”

“You get that information when we have an agreement.”

“Yeah, right. Just tell me who they are and what you know about the killings.”

Tom experienced a moment of desperation. He needed answers. Not being a McKnight didn’t bother him; it felt like relief; a kindness, yet an irrelevance compared to his current situation.

Another two shoppers drifted into their aisle, which only added to his frustration. He looked over at Noah, who nodded towards a smaller area to their left; a section provided for readers.

“I’ll give you some of the information, but it comes at a cost.”

Tom closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Here comes the rub.”

“Wake up, lad. You’re in trouble. Yes, the courier belonged to me. He’s dead ... because of you.”

Tom tried to shut out the images, but the memory of the young man’s terrible demise forced its way back into his mind.

“My organisation is willing to give you protection, but you’ll have to earn it. We’ll need your assistance with certain matters.”

“And what if I don’t?”

“I know what you’re thinking, Tom. You’ll just forget the whole thing and hide. That’s a mistake. Whoever killed your friend and my man, knew their business. They’ll find you, use you and kill you, lad. If you want to survive, your only real choice is me.”

“Bullshit. I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play games, Tom. You’ve seen it with your own eyes. Killing means nothing to these people.”

“You’ve got to be joking. Why me?”

“You get your answers when we have an agreement.”

“Come on, help me out here.”

Noah began to speak and Tom shifted closer. Simple answers, that’s all he needed. The idea of an agreement made him suspicious. This fellow sounded convincing, but he could just as easily be his enemy.

“Alright, Tom, I’ll give you this much. Your real father had an involvement in a restricted project. We’re talking about weapons development that superseded everything else; it provided the ultimate power for its owner. That’s why they want you so bad. You’re connected to these weapons.”

Noah stopped and looked around, as another reader drifted by.

“Make up your mind, Tom. I can’t tell you any more than I have. Not here; we’ve stayed too long already.”

“It sounds like crap to me.”

“For God’s sake, lad ...”

“Alright then, tell me who you are; who you represent. And, I want to know exactly why you’re helping me and what you want in return.”

Noah leaned further forward and lowered his voice.

“We’re a group called the PMSG, which means ‘The People’s Movement for Secular Government’.”

“I’ve heard of you. You’re that anti-government group that I read about in the news ... because of ...”

*Atrocities.*

More words appeared in Tom’s mind.

*Stupidity, mistake, danger.*

“Surely you realise that the papers are government owned, Tom. They only print what serves them.”

Tom stood and looked around. He felt anxious. Anyone in this shop could be one of them.

“Look, you’re probably right. They don’t seem to be my real parents, but I’m no radical either. Please. Don’t contact me anymore. I don’t want your help. I don’t need anyone’s help.”

Tom hurried out of the store and set off along the familiar putrid streets that led to his old residence. He knew of several places to hide, but first he needed to confront the people who pretended to be his parents. They knew something, or they knew someone who did. He needed answers. Even now, that hellcat of a woman could be following him.

## Chapter Six

Isobel tried to duck away from the wet leaves that evaded her scarf and attacked the only exposed portion of her face. She retaliated; flaying an open hand at the intrusion. She hated the wind. It penetrated through every layer of clothing, freezing her skin.

*What the hell happened to spring?*

As she tried to imagine gorgeous sunshine warming her face, the youthful countenance of another filled her vision.

“Good morning, Isobel.”

The young man stumbled in his haste to open the door for her. She gnashed her teeth and tried not to frown. Men acted so foolishly in her presence. ‘Your eyes are like jewels; you’re so beautiful’.

*Bullshit.*

Rampant hormones made her attractive to men. She knew what they wanted; what all men wanted.

She looked for her reflection in the glass door and winced.

*Damn freak.*

She recalled her mother’s comforting lies. ‘You’re petite, my dear. Not tiny’.

*What a load of rubbish.*

She weighed only thirty-nine and three quarter kilos. Even as a woman of nineteen, strangers treated her like they might a ten-year old.

She remembered standing naked in front of her bedroom mirror; never feeling beautiful, never feeling sexy; just hoping for a transformation; a miracle. She conjured many tall, curvaceous women, always imagining herself bursting with confidence, but when her eyes opened, there stood the same ‘twig’ with the tiny breasts and the protruding ribs.

She felt almost ill comparing her imagined self with the fleshless body beneath her clothing; a creature whose skinny legs created a gap between her thighs, a hand’s width apart. This made her pubic bone seem larger than what she considered to be normal. She looked prepubescent, with almost no pubic hair and noticeable weblike veins flowing under her translucent skin.

*I’m grotesque and horrible.*

She glared at the young man as he opened the door for her.

“Look, I’m paying you to be a technician not a dim-witted doorman.”

Isobel ignored his mumbled reply and entered. She allowed herself a moment to take in her surroundings.

*God, I love this place.*

The old Sydney Road building remained a link to her past; to her parents. It once accommodated a small furniture factory, with some offices and a showroom in the front upstairs portion and a production line operating on the ground floor.

Her father and his partner converted the two storeys of decaying red brick, exposed hardwood beams and rusty corrugated iron, into a high-tech fabric-testing laboratory.

“Excuse me, Miss Kite ...”

*Damn it ... Leave me alone. I don't want your attention.*

Isobel headed towards the back of the building, avoiding all conversation with speed. She maintained an angry expression as she proceeded, ignoring everyone in the room. As she reached the rear of the building, she allowed her eyes to follow the low ceiling and exposed pipes to where they turned upwards, disappearing into the heights of the interior. She began to relax. Here, her staff tested fabric strength and durability; it felt like a second home to her.

She mounted the steps to the mezzanine platform, which ran along the back wall of the building. It once housed spare parts and unused equipment, but she cleaned it up, glassed in the front and added the necessary equipment for an efficient office.

*Efficient ...?*

She frowned at the thought. She couldn't stand the accountancy side of the business, nor could she stomach the endless river of administrative duties.

“You're late, Isobel Kite.”

The woman standing by the door smiled, but meant it as a rebuke.

“We'll need to work through some of these figures before my appointment at the bank.”

Isobel tried to return her accountant's smile.

“Look, Mrs Cooper, is this really necessary? I've given you all of the paperwork and I'm really busy this morning.”

“Yes. I'm afraid it is. You can't put this off any longer, Isobel. We need to talk about your financial situation. Frankly, these figures don't present the business particularly well. I need to know your reasoning around some of your financial decisions, so I can try to negotiate your position with the bank.”

“Great.”

Isobel unlocked her office door and offered Jan Cooper the only chair other than her own.

*Old cow.*

She blamed her accountants for the demise of her company's finances; sacking her previous advisor in favour of her latest financial hope. She needed good advice; guidance that never seemed to eventuate. A condescending shake of her head remained Mrs Coopers only contribution.

Isobel attempted to ease past her visitor towards her side of the desk. She felt dazed and unfocused and she didn't notice the obstacle. At the last moment, she tried to stop her momentum by turning her body, but couldn't avoid crashing into an open filing cabinet drawer.

“Ow, that hurt.”

She tried to back up and rebalance, but her wet shoes gained no traction and she went down.

“Oh God, Isobel, are you all right?”

Isobel hung off the cabinet drawer; her watchband caught on its edge. It held and her arm stretched down to a body sprawled across the floor.

“Help me up will you, I'm stuck.”

Isobel tried to laugh, but her composure gave way to anger.

“Bloody hell. This isn't a particularly good omen is it?”

She fell into her chair and attempted to rub the pain from her wrist. She knew what Mrs Cooper intended to say, but she didn't want to hear it. She preferred denial rather than suffering the guilt associated with her inadequacies.

"Isobel, I know how much this place means to you, but you just can't afford the past anymore. Your present contracts got tendered at ridiculous prices and now there's not enough equity, or possible future income to stop the inevitable."

"The inevitable. That's blunt."

Isobel noticed her hands shaking. She pushed them further under her desk.

"Surely, it's not that bad. There has to be something you can do?"

"I'll try, but based on these figures, I don't think any bank is going to offer you another overdraft. I'm sorry."

Isobel continued massaging her swollen wrist. She couldn't give up without a fight, but the *how to proceed* eluded her. Her position seemed hopeless. Poor management skills hindered any real opportunities for success. She excelled at science and mathematics, but as an administrator ... she knew her failings.

Isobel sighed with relief when her accountant finally left. Alone, she could think. She belonged here and she couldn't see herself anywhere else. Eviction removed her only remaining connection with her late parents, especially her father.

She lifted her wrist to catch the light and her arm began to throb. She could see a red welt, but the skin didn't appear to be broken.

"Stupid ugly thing."

She tried to smile. Her father presented her with the broken timepiece not long before he died. Looking at it usually made her laugh.

*Bloody worthless rubbish.*

The watch; a Seiko, belonged to her father's business partner. Her father asked her to wear it until his partner's son arrived to pick it up. If nothing else, she remained faithful to that promise. She wore the awful thing every day and wondered about its owner. It embarrassed her sometimes. She spent so much time imagining him that he became a fully-developed fantasy in her mind.

She needed decent project funding, not an imaginary man. She felt silly believing he might come.

She sat back in her chair, sucked in some air and sighed.

"Ah, Mr Fox, my imaginary knight in shining armour."

She frowned at her depressing recurrent thinking.

She knew these to be strange thought processes, considering her distrust of men; even approaching the periphery of her memories regarding any male other than her father, made her tense and sick with loathing.

She remembered her thirteen-year-old self; so inadequate, just a baby girl compared to her female acquaintances and classmates. She hated the 'in girls', they collected boyfriends so easily and teased her with the secrets of their liaisons. She understood the bullying in their embellishments. They elevated themselves by keeping her in her place. It made her feel worse than nothing.

Then a miracle occurred. Jenna Jovanovich, one of the prettiest girls in her school, befriended her; a boon that instantly inducted her into the same 'in crowd'. She didn't care that her new glamour-girl status arose out of association only.

The following week, Jenna invited her to an impromptu, after-school party, which Isobel accepted without hesitation. It meant that she could be late home and have some explaining to do, but she couldn't turn down her first invitation; she might never receive another.

When she arrived at Jenna's house, there didn't seem to be any party, just two boys drinking Vodka Cruisers and no parents. Isobel felt scared, wanting to leave, but Jenna pulled

her by the arm, pressuring her to join them. After only one glass, she felt tipsy and began to relax; the alcohol creating feelings of excitement.

A boy held her hand and stroked her neck. She recalled Daniel's nice even features and sandy hair; a hunk interested in her. She also remembered his good-looking friend, Roberto, lying on the lounge room floor kissing Jenna.

The rape took place in the Jovanovich's master bedroom.

It began with a kiss that made her tiny body shiver. Then everything changed. Somehow it felt wrong, which the boy confirmed when she attempted to pull away from him. The more she struggled the more violent he became.

"Please ... No ... Stop."

Daniel's placid features morphed into a grotesque angry mask, as he pinned her to the bed and tore at her clothes. Isobel screamed when he entered her. The pain burnt like alcohol rubbed into an open wound. She tried to fight him off, but couldn't move. Then she remembered Roberto and Jenna materialising in the room and she called out to them for help.

She heard them laugh at her. Then she heard Jenna's shrieking encouragement to her lover.

"You give it to her, Robbie. Hurt her. Hurt the little bitch."

Isobel tried to roll away as the participants changed position, but couldn't break free. Now Roberto grunted above her, holding her down with a hand squeezing her throat; his sweat and saliva dripping over her face. She felt too numb and tired to continue fighting.

Isobel reported the incident to the local police, but the humiliation hurt her almost as much as the attack. She discovered that victims of rape didn't exist here. Sydney's Special Religious Police viewed such cases, as promiscuity escalating out of control. She remembered the comments and the mocking smirks; women who 'led men on' got what they deserved.

*They think I'm common. They think I'm a slut.*

She felt dirty saying it. She forced her eyes closed and attempted to remove the memories. In her more generous moments, she accepted the theory that some men were good, but she struggled to maintain her optimism. The world seemed to conspire with her darker beliefs and prove them right every time. Despite this, she knew her father to be a wonderful man, which she supposed provided some hope for mankind.

*I don't want anyone's help.*

She knew that no one person, other than herself could make a difference to her circumstances. Nothing could change the events of her life, especially someone she didn't know. She placed her forehead into the palm of her hand and examined the old timepiece.

"You're as ugly as I am. We're meant for each other."

She smiled bitterly.

Her heart and the stupid watch held an unwanted bond; neither seemed to work after the death of her parents.