

# Prologue

There was a God. After all these years he knew, and God looked down in the absolute dark and laughed to see him fall. Each flash of red, the scroll of blazing flame across his eyes was the blink of God and the overwhelming roar was God's laughter. He climbed to his knees and stretched out his arms in supplication.

*God! Oh, God!*

He felt the whippy branches of the mangroves, the freezing damp, his knees sinking slowly into the mud. But the mud held the mangroves' spiked roots; he could feel them piercing his feet. This much he knew of where he was: he had run too far in terror. And where the black men had left him, the demons had taken up the hunt. He was in their realm and his labouring heart told him he would never leave it. Heat burned inside his skull and groin but his skin was frosted with ice.

*God help me!*

He heard voices. A chitter of laughter, a bestial growl. Once more they were gaining. He tried to stand and

instead fell full-length into the embrace of mud and roots — mud in his mouth, his nostrils, spikes in his belly and everywhere the putrid sweetness of decay. That sweet stink alone was torment. He turned his head so he was not breathing mud. How had it come to this? He had waited and made his plans, acted when the time was right. God knew his crimes better than any Court, better than the justice of mad King George that had sent him across the sea. What had he done but steal a rich man's game to feed his family and maybe to sell? Drinking, whoring, nothing to damn him — nothing to make him fret if this was where he was to die.

Then the thought occurred to him that he was already dead, and he began to scream. Mud sprayed, coughing and choking he scrambled up and once more he ran, smack into a tree. Stars exploded. 'Check your bio-suit,' it read. He wrapped his arms around it, pressing his body to its solidity. There was pain in his nose and warm liquid slowly filling his mouth, washing away some of the foul taste. He was not dead. No, not by his heart, his breath, the tang of his own blood on his tongue. He was not rotting yet. If he could only rein in his fear and shut out the noise, there was a place he could go. They could help him there, treat his fever (for in truth this was only a fever, he knew, he knew).

But he had run from there. Escaped them.

He clung to the tree and it was smooth and curved. Its coolness soothed him. Soft folds pressed against his thighs, little nubs rubbed at his chest and he found a name to call it. 'Annabelle,' he cried, though the name felt wrong, as if a piece of it did not fit. But then a spark caught in him and without self-consciousness he moved,

feeling the warmth build, feeling himself stiffen (so long he'd been without her, so very long). And then the voice came.

WHY HIDE YOURSELF FROM ME?

He squawked and writhed, trying to shield himself without letting go.

IS IT BECAUSE YOU ARE ASHAMED?

*No! No, please ...* His hands parted and he stumbled back into the roaring, whispering void. A flash and he fell heavily backwards, so his cock was pointing up into the night. He howled. The night flashed and he seemed to see things he had not done, could not have done. Strange, flattened glimpses of a machine that flew like a dragonfly, and a young, black man, the side of his head missing. He saw blood, and crazy laughter echoed in his head.

*No!*

WHY RESIST ME? SURRENDER YOURSELF TO ME. LOVE ME.

*God, someone help me!* He dug down into the mud and beneath his fingers it moved. Under his palm something puckered, heavy and clotted, and spoke: '*Man nggununy!*'

ACCEPT ME AND SEE THE TRUTH.

And as the whispers and growls, the barking and weeping converged on him, he did see. In his mind it grew like a great crystal, containing glimpses of lives upon lives, stretching back and forth through time. The machine was but one facet of the whole. The man, one facet.

Facet: beasts howled and tore with claws and teeth.

Facet: fire swept over him, falling walls crushed him. His skin burned. His skin covered acres.

Facet: a war where glass and rubber hid faces, reflecting strangely shaped guns and a wilderness of mud and wire. A voice was shrieking *gas, the wind has changed, they're using gas* — and he thought it was his.

His visions increased in frequency, a terrible flickering of image and colour (but it was fever, all only fever). All colours, the whole spectrum of light shattered through a prism, and he began to shake.

Facet: he wielded club and spear and a shield of bark, the joyful chant of battle upon his tongue in words he could no longer understand. *Man nggununy!*

Facet: spinal plants uncoiled above him and steam rose beneath his feet.

Facet: an angel with skin as clear as light, skin held apart with hooks and wire and rods of metal, empty as sin. Oh, his angel, coming for him —

And as the shaking grew and thin, slick sounds entered and escaped him, as the facets flashed and blurred, he saw the purpose of all his days and screamed, but when he opened his mouth only red came out.

WE ARE ETERNAL, MY LOVE. WE SHALL NOT BE DENIED. FOR MINE IS THE KINGDOM IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, FOREVER AND EVER —

*Please ...*

And then there was only the light.

# Chapter 1: Now

‘Here it is,’ said Daniel, and he started steering the small runabout to the shore.

Jacqueline turned to look at him. ‘Hey, I’m the one who’s been here before.’

He grinned at her. ‘Yes, but I read the map.’ He had an easy grin, not quite flirtatious. When organising this mad venture, she’d asked the woman who had referred her to Daniel if he was an arsehole. The woman, Tina Parkins from EcoState Labs, had laughed down the phone line and said no.

Jacqueline was undecided. The fact he was wearing shorts definitely counted against him, but she figured he was doing alright so far. So she smiled back, and braced herself for impact as the boat ran up upon the shell-littered beach. Hell, he’d arranged transportation, which was saving a lot of time.

He killed the gently chugging engine and they both hopped out, pulling the boat further onto land. He started rooting around in the various sacks he had brought,

while she stretched her legs and surveyed the terrain. It was a beautiful sunny Saturday, and the ride up the river had been lovely. There were, what, four million people in the city around them? And the only one they had seen since they passed under the Fig Tree Bridge had been a lone canoeist, who had ignored them completely. The only sign of civilisation had been the occasional building high enough to rise above the gum trees on either side of the Lane Cove River valley.

A duck flew low across the water, towards Sugarloaf Point on the opposite bank. There was something beautiful about it, something dignified beyond those waddling creatures she'd seen in the small lakes of the university.

'Pluck it and fuck it', she said softly, an automatic reflex against the calm of the moment. Daniel apparently heard, as he looked up with a questioning look. 'It's quiet ... too quiet,' she said with a horror movie quaver.

He nodded, unsmiling, and, toting an unwieldy variety of glass vials, small digging tools, a bulky handset, and what looked like a compass, followed her round towards the back of the mangroves.

The beach was really just packed mud, littered with pebbles and broken shells. The warmth of the day evaporated quickly as they made their way under the canopy, threading between the mass of mangrove roots thrusting out of the soil and the spiky grass further inland. Here, lone roots, questing further than the packed mass of their brethren, crunched softly beneath their feet. This patch of mangrove was small, maybe a hundred metres long by five or six metres deep, although there were similar habitats all along the river. Beyond it, the gum trees looked all but impenetrable.

'Just say where,' Daniel said.

She shrugged, knowing it was pointless trying to pretend she had any idea. ‘Here seems good,’ she said. ‘And further into the swamp, I guess, if you can get there.’

He dropped his assortment of gear. ‘The occult history of Sydney, you reckon?’

She shrugged again, not trying to justify it here, and he started to dig.



He was at the third site — if that was what you could call a hole in the ground — when he found it. Having already asked if she could help and receiving a ‘not really’ in reply, she was caught in idle fantasy, somewhere between rising floodwaters and getting rid of those god-awful shorts. ‘Look at this,’ he exclaimed.

Jacqueline leant against a trunk and rose to her toes, trying for a vantage point — he was about two meters in from where it was easy to stand. In previous holes he had simply used thin metal tubing to take a sample, but now he was scraping the mud away with a trowel. There were bricks down there, maybe fifteen centimetres deep.

‘It looks old,’ he said. ‘See how the roots are far less sturdy here? I thought that might have been biological, but the area is too regular in shape. Couple of square feet. Who’s been burying stuff here?’ He looked up. ‘This isn’t anything to do with your occult history thing?’

She shook her head. ‘No, I told you. That was Aboriginal legend and obscure plant species. Even assuming I’ve got the location right.’

‘Hold on a sec.’ He gingerly stepped out from the mangroves and hurried around the perimeter, back to

the boat. For just a moment, standing in the light that filtered through the mangrove leaves and pierced the gloom in crazy patterns, she felt shockingly alone. *Four million people*, she thought. By the time he returned, she was steady again.

This time, he was carrying a crowbar.

‘Crazy psycho gear, or standard scientific equipment?’ she said.

He grinned, raising his eyebrows in mock conspiracy. ‘Shall we?’

Now the grin was infectious. ‘Yeah.’



This time she did help, transferring the bricks out to create a growing pile amidst the long grass. She made a half-hearted effort to avoid disturbing the woody tendrils beneath them more than necessary, but it seemed a bit academic at this point. As they dug, it became obvious that the buried room — or whatever it was — was a lot larger than a few square feet, but was tilted so only the top corner was affecting the root systems.

After a while, Daniel took his shirt off. Jacqueline wolf-whistled and he bowed. Even though she was sweating profusely, the sight of her companion’s unmarked flesh made her feel self-conscious, and she didn’t roll up the sleeves of her blouse, keeping the tattoos hidden. Most of the time he was driving the crowbar down hard between the individual bricks, crumbling the mortar and then trying to get sufficient leverage to remove larger chunks. Sometimes the bricks would break up, but most of them remained solid, larger and rougher than

the modern house brick. By the time they were approaching the tenth one, all she could think about was her complaining body, and how she might call a halt to this gracefully. So when he knelt and put his head down into the hole he'd cleared, she didn't register for a moment.

'Can't see a damn thing,' he called up.

'It smells funny,' she said, after several moments spent blinking down at his prostrate back.

It did, though it was a subtle odour under the freshly turned mud, brick dust and sweat. It was almost sweet, and reminded her of a song, somehow.

'Yeah, hold on a sec.'

He rose again, and she saw it was only a small and irregular hole he'd cleared, through about thirty centimetres of brick into empty space. This time he attacked one of the bricks from the side, and in a few sharp blows it worked loose, crashing down in the darkness.

Immediately the smell became sharp, almost overpowering. She gagged and stepped back reflexively, trying to stop herself retching.

Daniel was also having trouble, and in scrambling away tripped over himself, falling backwards onto yet more roots. She went to help him and saw he'd scraped his arm badly against one of the thicker trunks.

'I'm fine,' he said croakily, snatching the arm away from her helping hand.

*Death and vanilla*, she thought. A Bad Seeds song. *And a voice that stinks of death and vanilla.*

He scrambled to his feet, trying to repress a shiver running through his body, and when he looked at her, she thought his eyes were colder and darker than she remembered.

Together they went back to the hole and looked down. Even in the dim, inconstant light she could make out a human body less than half a metre below the opening. The flesh was dark and sunken, and worms twisted in the gelid sheen of it.

She half-registered the brick sunk into the pelvis, where it looked like bone had crumpled like paper beneath the sudden weight, but her gaze was drawn up to the face.

‘There’s another one as well,’ said Daniel. ‘It’s a leg, I think.’

But all she could see were teeth, and sockets that had once held eyes but were now only coldness and darkness without hope of relief.

‘Too cool,’ she whispered.



The whole point of mangroves, Jacqueline remembered from somewhere, is that they spread their roots wide, and then thrust them out into the air again, so that they remained stable in tidal conditions, or could breathe underwater, or something. Whatever the case, she saw now that the tide was creeping in. The execution site could well be under water soon.

‘Should we really have been digging a hole in there, you reckon?’

‘It wasn’t exactly waterproof before,’ replied Daniel. ‘You saw how damp it was down there.’

Jacqueline remembered dry mortar crumbling against her sleeves, but didn’t comment. They were both leaning against the boat. It had been over an hour since Jacqueline had rung the emergency number on her mobile phone, and there was no sign of any response.

A double kayak had travelled by them ten minutes ago, the rowers looking like they were intent on beating the four kilometres per hour speed limit on this stretch of the river.

While he had been digging, Jacqueline had thought her companion's flesh was unmarked. Now, in the sunlight, she was not so sure. There was a tracery of scars, faded and old, down his back and arms. They seemed to form a strange pattern she could not quite keep in her mind. But then, she was having trouble concentrating anyway. She kept thinking about the bodies and the sweet familiar smell, and whether they did have something do with her research.

Also, the police. There seemed to have been no question about calling them, but that did not mean she was looking forward to the meeting. That hardly ever ended well.

'There is no tree but bears some fruit,' Daniel said.

Jacqueline turned to look at him.

'Have you ever tasted the fruit of the mangrove?' he continued. 'It's quite tasty.'

'Uh, no.'

Silence fell again. A gull skimmed the water, looking for food.

'Ambrosia of the river god.'

'Right.' She was tempted to ask if he had licked his own balls, fully subscribing as she did to the John Birmingham definition of manhood. Instead she went back into the dim canopy to see if there was anything else to find.

The sweet smell still lingered and she put her arm across her mouth to stop herself gagging again. A shifting cloud had given her more light, so she could make out a little more of the detail below.

It was hard to tell the dimensions of the space, or how the corpses had come to be resting so close to the supposed ceiling. There did seem to be only the two bodies, one more deeply buried than the other. Any clothes, or indication of gender, had long since rotted away, it seemed, though there was something resembling a misshapen belt buckle beside the fallen brick. She guessed that invalidated any thought of Aboriginal remains, though the presence of the bricks was probably a better indication.

She had once looked upon the human remains kept *in situ* in the Jenolan caves (despite the best efforts of the tour guides), but that was only a bundle of bones. She had stumbled over a man in an alley once. ‘Can’t hold his piss,’ she’d laughed with her companions — they had other places to be. Only later, in some unfamiliar bed, did she wonder if he had been dead or dying, and the guilt had crawled under her skin like roaches.

She had cleaned the vomit from a junkie’s mouth, and held her close. But she had run when the paramedics arrived, and never found out if the girl had made it or not.

She had (of course) been to the exhibition of plasticised bodies at the SuperDome.

Now the urge to simply reach down and run her fingers across human detritus was almost irresistible. She was not sure how long she sat there, resisting, feeling nauseous and light-headed.

But then something caught her eye, beneath the outstretched arm of the upper corpse. Carefully, she brushed away some of the mud. At first she thought it was a skull, as if she was being tricked into contact, but she

soon found stitches and realised it was some sort of bag. She looked back to the river and up the hill into the bush, but saw no sign of movement. She leant over again and started extracting it carefully from its burial place.

It was bulkier than she first imagined, but it came away easily. It felt like there was a book in there, or more than one, carefully protected against the elements. Extracting the bag fully, she sat back on the pile of rubble behind her and tried to figure out if she could open it.

‘Hey!’ A shout rolled down the hill at them, and Daniel quickly replied.

*Fucking cooee*, she thought. But she was glad of the interruption, for putting further temptation to rest. She debated whether to leave the bag, perhaps even try to bury it again, then shrugged, and went to see what was going on.



The policeman’s gaze moved from her nose stud, to her tits and, even further, to her hips. Jacqueline’s moved to the double stripe on his epaulets. ‘You the woman who called Emergency?’ the senior constable said, when his gaze finally rose to meet her own.

‘Yes,’ she said, keeping her voice carefully neutral.

‘Name?’

‘Jacqueline Cooper.’

‘You reported the finding of a body?’

‘Two bodies.’

He nodded. ‘What’s in the bag?’ This time his gaze didn’t move.

‘I don’t know. We found that as well. I thought it might be damaged if we left it there.’

‘And you are?’ His attention had switched to Daniel, still leaning against the boat in nothing but shorts and sturdy boots.

‘Daniel O’Connor.’ There was surliness in that reply, short though it was. It surprised her. It seemed he didn’t like cops either, and was making less effort to disguise the fact than she.

The policeman didn’t seem to notice, but turned back to her, gaze again at chest height. ‘Right. These are Constables Walsh, Lowder and Chisari.’ The three of them hung back and nodded perfunctorily. ‘I am Senior Constable Rosser. Why don’t you show us what you found, Ms Cooper?’

Rosser and Chisari, who was the only female of the four newcomers, followed Jacqueline around the increasingly familiar path behind the mangrove swamp. The other two seemed content to stay with Daniel. One of them, Lowder maybe, was obviously younger than the others and already had a notebook out, scribbling furiously.

Chisari smiled at her as they picked their way forward. ‘It was a good idea to bring the boat. I’m just hoping we can find a quicker route back to the car through that jungle.’ Jacqueline nodded, but would not be drawn, even though she had had trouble herself on the two occasions she had come here alone.

Rosser whistled when he found their work, and wrinkled his nose against the smell. He grabbed a torch from his belt and shone a powerful beam down the hole. ‘I figured. They’re a bit old for us. The Heritage Commission and the National Parks and Wildlife will fight over this one. The Wildlife mob have their own archaeologists and will probably get precedence, it being a national

park and all. They'll probably give you hell for this, moving the bag and all, but I wouldn't worry about it too much. Anyway, looks like a good call to me — the tide's coming in.'

He seemed positively cheerful, and moved aside to let Chisari take a look. 'We'll go and get some more details and get the wheels in motion.'

'And find the car again,' said Chisari.

He snorted. 'Come on then, Jackie.'

'Jacqueline, please.'

'Right you are, Ms Cooper.'

They moved out, in single file behind her.

'So what were you digging for anyway?' asked Chisari, too casually.

'Biological samples. I have historical records about a species of mould growing in this area, which is relevant for a paper I'm writing. Daniel volunteered to help me out.'

'How do you know each other?' That was Rosser again.

'Daniel works for a private research firm who do work in this area. I rang them up looking for references, and now here we are.'

'It's called EcoState Environmental Laboratories,' Daniel interjected. 'We mainly do work in wetland preservation, environmental impact studies, that sort of thing.' He was still where they had left him, but now he'd put his shirt back on. Jacqueline looked curiously at him, and the two policemen who had waited with him. There was an odd, palpable tension in the stiffened stance of the officers.

'Lots of money in that sort of thing?' Rosser ploughed on, oblivious.

'Not that much, trust me. And this job was more of a favour.'

Rosser looked between the two, speculatively, as if he was weighing up how much sexual contact such a favour might be worth. With little more than a gesture, he directed Walsh and Lowder back to have a look at the bodies. They looked happy to leave, and Lowder was clenching his notepad too tightly. She shot a quizzical look at Daniel, but he didn't seem to notice. Rosser continued the questioning. 'You've got all necessary permits for doing this research, I gather?'

Daniel nodded, leant backwards and pulled a thin sheaf of paper out of the boat. Rosser waved his hand, as if to say he wasn't interested enough to check. 'And this mould you said you are looking for. What is it —'

He broke off, because Daniel had taken another step forward and with a quick yet somehow elegant grace, grasped Rosser's face and leant forward to kiss him on the lips.

It seemed to Jacqueline the queasy feeling in her stomach, the heat of the sun, even the stillness of the day, all seemed to distil within her. She looked on the unexpected tableau with total disbelief as the kiss held. It wasn't a dynamic kiss, but firm and wet.

Part of her wanted to cheer this reversal of authority, but that was hidden deep beneath the prickly and nauseous part that didn't understand what was going on. There was even a twinge in her guts that she might have mistaken for jealousy. Perhaps she stepped backwards, she wasn't sure.

Daniel released Rosser and held up the papers for him to take. The senior constable blinked, dazed, and his tongue flicked out lightly against the middle of his top lip, as if he was checking it was still there. She expected him to lash out, was almost looking forward to it. Even if

he was gay, she couldn't expect anyone to stand for that ... invasion. That's what it had been, beyond any sexuality.

'What —' was all he managed.

'I'm sorry officer. I'm distraught at the finding of the bodies, I'm sure you understand.'

Jacqueline was quite sure he didn't.

'You wanted to see these?'

'Yes, yes.' Rosser blinked blankly at the papers being proffered again. 'Anyway, we'll contact Parks and Wildlife and, ah, get the wheels in motion.'

Daniel nodded. Jacqueline finally thought to look at Chisari. She looked equally stunned. Her fist was balled tightly against her stomach, as if to shield it from attack.

'Well —' Rosser tried again but there was movement from behind them, and both Constables Walsh and Lowder appeared, looking sober. Jacqueline wondered if Lowder had found anything to write about.

'Right then, we're off.' None of them questioned Rosser's decision. In fact, the three of them obeyed at speed. Chisari was the last, and she turned to look at the two, bewildered. Jacqueline couldn't help herself. She blew the woman a kiss, and saw her flinch.



The familiar sounds of lightsabre combat echoed down the hallway as Jacqueline locked the door behind her. She was exhausted and filthy, her muscles were killing her, and some of her scratches were still seeping blood. Most of those she had copped fighting back up through the dense bushland — she hadn't wanted to return on the boat with Daniel. Not that he seemed to notice the

snub, and for all she knew, he was still at the site, waiting for further official attention or babbling about river gods.

She threw her shoes into the bath on the way through, and ducked into the kitchen. ‘Kisses,’ she called to her flatmate, Peta, who remained absorbed in her virtual Jedi powers. Somehow she managed to make something resembling a tuna sandwich with one hand, not even considering putting down the bag she had taken.

The next stop was her bedroom (past the sign reading ‘Genda Terrorist’), where she collapsed into the dodgy office chair she had found on the street. Her desk was a mess. Scrapbooks were lying open with scattered clippings on feral black panthers, the life cycle of the Blue Mountain yowie, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Phoenix, the Gargoyle Club, desecration at Rookwood and more. There was a photo essay of Waverley Cemetery, advertisements for a ghost tour at the Old Government House at Parramatta (haunted by sentient ball lightning, apparently), and a book on the art of Rosaleen Norton (famed witch of Kings Cross). On the wall was taped a photocopied map of Castlecrag, the swank northern suburb designed by Walter and Marion Burley-Griffin, the Theosophists who had given Canberra its esoteric loops. There wasn’t really room for anything else, and she couldn’t just dump the bag anyway — it was still filthy. The urge to do something warred with the desire to clean herself, and she sat there for ten minutes, letting the exhaustion win.

*Have a shower, she told herself. Then do something. Open the bag, scribble some notes for the thesis, jump on-line, play a game.*

There was a photo of Simon on the desk as well, in his fatigues. *Screw them all, and do something.* She looked into his expressionless eyes, and knew better.



‘You ought to get out of the house, Jackie-girl,’ admonished Peta.

‘Yes, mum.’ The fact she’d spent the majority of the day out and about was not relevant. By this stage the conversation, what there was of it, was entirely ritualistic. Peta was bustling about the flat, looking for something else to put in her hair, no doubt. It was understood she didn’t expect Jacqueline to go out with her, if only because Japanese pop was not a shared passion between them. Really, it was understood Jacqueline wasn’t going anywhere at all.

She irritably turned the TV off. It was distracting her, and that was not what she wanted — at least, she didn’t think so. But she soon found herself watching the few solitary fish in their tank. (Great idea, buy the aquarium and then discover you can’t afford the fish to stock it.)

She’d had a shower and cleaned the bag. She didn’t know if she should have taken it, but then again she didn’t know when the alleged archaeologists were going to turn up either. Much safer if she held onto it, and they could chase it up later.

*Yeah, right.* On the way home she had realised the cops had not taken her full details or address. Maybe she should watch the news, to see if there was any mention of it all.

Or she could just sit here, in the armchair, like any other night. Think of Simon, and the others. She had her Guinness to look forward to, after all.

‘Bye, sweetie,’ Peta called from the front door. It slammed behind her. By day, Peta Telleni efficiently directed taxis from one end of the city to the other. Well, she had never described herself as efficient, but Jacqueline could just tell. By night, weekends at least, there was bubble-gum music and bubblegum lights, and not much else, apparently. No strange men staggering about the flat in the pre-dawn, flicking their dried jism onto the floor — not since Jacqueline had given up her wicked ways.

*Maybe you really should get out. How about it? Stretch the legs. Find a bar and get shit-faced, find a guy and talk to him. Find Daniel.*

She shivered, suddenly and violently enough to clack her teeth together.

The ritual was sixteen months old now, well established, though sometimes she tried to fight it. She really would sit down to her thesis for a while, or play one of Peta’s games, before finding herself in the armchair. Mostly she was resigned to it, settling into all her bitter reminiscences to get them over and done with, at least for one more evening.

Now, she almost dove into it, just to escape that sudden image, inexplicably repulsive and fascinating, of the half-naked young man, leaning against a boat on a muddy beach, with a come-hither smile. She knew a lot about that slippery area of repulsion and fascination — she had detailed maps, you might say — but Daniel O’Connor didn’t fit in any of them.

Sixteen months of ritual was enough to protect her, surely. Sixteen months since it all went to hell, and hell turned out to be an armchair and one Guinness a night.



It hadn't been about the sex and the drugs — it had been about the four of them: the wholesome foursome, the gets, or whatever name their little coterie might collect and then discard. Herself, Caris, Simon and Than. Sex, drugs, dancing and blow jobs in the dark. She met Caris the same night she met heroin, and maybe at that point she was on the slippery slope, the spiralling path of destruction. Whatever you called it, the two balanced each other somehow, the drug just an accent to their delight in each other and the things they shared. And then there was Simon and Than, who may or may not have been screwing each other (each was certainly happy to claim the other as his bitch), and then they were all hanging together.

They attended tattoo parlours with each other, and 'sexual health' clinics, and nursed each other through bad trips, and talked each other out of particularly stupid piercings.

So she was on that spiral, spinning faster than her rebellious high school self would believe, but always reined in, always knowing what each experiment was likely to cost.

If Jacqueline had one fear, it was for Caris. Simon spent most of his time moving from one temp computer job to the next. Than's family had money, and he was eternally enrolled in an economics degree, in pursuit of some entirely unlikely future. Caris, however, was a nurse. For her, the drugs were necessary stress relief, and the sex apparently equally necessary as a precursor to sleep off-shift. Jacqueline could sense the time would

come when that pressure would ease, and she wouldn't need either, nor perhaps Jacqueline, in the same way again.

But it was Simon that surprised them all. 'The army?' each of them repeated one after the other in the same wounded tone. Simon, it seemed, was fighting the war on terror, or whatever it was the army was doing in those days. He said he was being posted far away, and that had to be a lie, surely? Not so soon.

Jacqueline went round to his house that night, and there seemed surprisingly little to say. He went to bed and she followed him, and took him in her mouth and made him come. That was the only time she ever felt the act of fellatio demeaned her, for she would otherwise expect as much as she would give. She left, and that was it.

The balance was broken. Caris and Than started to argue, in a way that suggested they would be as fucked up as any couple. She thought they were using more than they should, but it was hard to tell. It was hard to tell anything. She had a bad trip herself, and came out the other side realising she wanted none of it. She spent the day in bed, listening to drive-time radio go on forever, Peta wandering in and out occasionally, mewling. In the evening she got up to grab leftover curry and a bottle of beer, which solved nothing, but gave her a splitting headache.

The week went on, and the headaches decreased. She laid in a supply of Guinness, and even turned the thermostat of the fridge down for it. Very cold turkey, she'd said to Peta. If she was going straight (and this was not anything like she had expected it to be) she might as well do it in style.

Caris would call sometimes, and it seemed there was enough paranoia left in her to be getting on with. Jacqueline would lie in bed on those evenings, and imagine Than and Caris playing doctor and nurse over her supine body — complete with scalpel.

(Those times reminded her of this afternoon, the incipient paranoia by the river, and somehow of the unnatural surety of Daniel and those scars upon his flesh.)

But that faded as well, into weeks and months and seasons. She did stuff — part-time uni, the occasional movie on a Tuesday morning, the occasional job interview where she would not disguise her washed-out stare. She read books on occult history, and filled her scrapbooks, because she remembered she was interested in that sort of thing. There was a thesis to write, because you were supposed to do that sort of thing. And now there were dead bodies! Would that be worth an extra couple of per cent?

It all faded, into empty evenings and Peta's ritual, telling her she should get out of the house. And it was only sometimes she thought that meant for good.



Somewhere in a column between Shane Warne and 'Southeast Asia's Rich List' was a photo of a man Jacqueline recognised. She clicked on the accompanying caption: 'Cop in Road Rage Slaying.' Constable Walsh, that was the name; Dennis Walsh according to the article. She scanned quickly. He had done the slaying, rather than vice versa, which had been her first impression.

‘Ran red light ... pistol-whipped ... Glebe Point Road ... incoherent ... died two hours after admittance ...’

*There is no tree but bears some fruit*, she thought.

She read the article, engrossed. Walsh had stopped a man for a minor traffic infringement and had become enraged. He had bodily dragged the man from the car, in front of multiple witnesses, and started beating him. One witness claimed he had pointed the pistol at the man’s head, before using it as a bludgeon. Before his arrest, Walsh had apparently stood his ground and sworn incoherently at the crowd, most of whom had scuttled away. The Police Commissioner had released a statement saying he had been placed under observation. And that was it — no explanation, no theories.

She started again at the top of the page, but her head felt funny, and her eyesight started to swim. Somehow she pushed ctrl-d to bookmark, before sprinting for the bathroom. It turned out she wasn’t going to throw up, but she stood there over the bowl for a minute or two, just to make sure.

Had it been drugs? Had the police been using on that day on the riverbank? That might explain the weirdness, but it didn’t feel right to her. She shivered. She knew full well that cops could get away with a lot, even these days — if Walsh had gone psycho somewhere more discreet, he’d still be out there. If it had happened last week, there might have been two more bodies down that hole in that riverbank, and no-one would ever have known.

Daniel had spooked her, it was true. The whole thing had been freaky. The only reason she had been there in the first place was to try and grab an interesting fact or two that wasn’t culled from newspaper clippings, and it

had escalated into a scientific expedition, then escalated into something else again. She'd been in freakier situations, no question about that. But not recently. This was all getting a bit too ... real.

She got up and went to her room, and looked up at the book and papers sitting on top of her cupboard. On Sunday — the morning following the excavation — she'd opened the bag she'd found. It had been sealed against moisture, but when she had managed to pry open the leather flap, there was a wet sucking sound that made her wince. It wasn't too bad, but likewise it had been obvious she wasn't going to be able to do any proper reading without drying things out first.

The archaeologists still hadn't contacted her. That twinge of guilt was another reason she had put it aside, on top of her cupboard to dry. On the two days she'd gone in to Uni, she hadn't raised the subject at all with her lecturer, of the bag or the excavation. Each morning she had felt the stack of paper, but she had never been satisfied they were properly dry. She had considered other options — heating them gently somehow, or just trying to photocopy them, one careful page at a time, but she hadn't been satisfied with those plans either. Maybe she didn't *want* to read it.

She looked across at the photo of Simon, eternally challenging her from her desk. The thought crossed her mind that she should turn the photo away and that was the last straw. She stood up on the chair and took the whole lot down, shoving a scrapbook aside to make room on the desk. Yes, it was still a little damp, and obviously fragile, but she would at least see what she had.

It was the book she turned to first. Its leather cover looked well made and expensive, but it seemed to have been scuffed and well-used long before it had been put inside the bag. She opened it carefully. On the inside page was an inscription declaring ownership, and it caught her breath.

‘Well, hello Mr Fancy Pants,’ she said softly, almost reverently, tracing the elegant calligraphy with her finger. ‘Would you be the Adam Waters of that almost entirely unknown thesis, *Traditional Remedies of the North Sydney Region?*’

She turned further, and discovered that it was.