

The Coincidence God

John Lewis

(First Fifty Pages)

Some of this story is true

A few names and times have been changed

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'Let music and dancing fill your house,

Love the child who holds your hand.'

From *The epic of Gilgamesh*

2000BC

PART ONE

DOGAN

One

I am the Coincidence God!

There, I've gone ahead and told you in my opening sentence rather than give you an inkling that I might indeed be the subject of the story. I've done this because, if I hadn't told you up front, at an early stage you probably would have wondered if I was the subject and then been distracted from concentrating on other matters.

Most people experience amazing coincidences in their life. I call myself the Coincidence God because, not only do I seem to attract many more coincidences than most people, I discovered that I can actually cause events to coincide when I want them to.

I was prompted to write this story only last week, because the prod to get moving on it struck me like a push in the back when I was driving through the northern Sydney suburb of Wahroonga to pick up my granddaughter from school.

In recent years, I have earned my living as a consultant to the Australian government and other large organisations both at home and abroad. But, as this work comes my way irregularly, I have plenty of free time. So, I supplement my income by writing novels and screenplays and had been toying for some time on writing a memoir, one I believe would have wide appeal.

Whenever I take my granddaughter to or from school, I enjoy imparting worldly wisdom which she says she appreciates, despite it drawing her gaze from the phone to which it is usually locked. The conversation I had with her while taking her to school on the morning before I received the prod in the back to start writing was typical.

She glanced up from scrolling through her phone while reading the news headlines. "Jesse Jackson died. Who's Jesse Jackson?"

"Jesse Jackson! I once saw him stepping out of a lift." I could see him doing that again in my mind's eye. At Dulles airport in Washington surrounded by minders. "He was a black American leader of the civil rights movement."

"What's the civil rights movement?"

“It was a fight by African Americans to be allowed to sit at the front of a bus, among other things, and their kids to go to school with white kids.”

“Why couldn’t they do that before?”

“When we have enough time, I’ll tell you.”

“Where did you see him getting out of a lift?”

“In Washington. Washington DC, the town where politicians and Beltway bandits are thick on the ground. Not the state where elks and bears are thick on the ground.”

“They have bandits there? Men with big hats and moustaches who rob trains?”

“No, not Mexican bandits in olden days. Beltway bandits. Beltway bandits rob the government these days.”

“Why aren’t they arrested?”

“The government doesn’t know it’s being robbed.”

“Why do they call them Beltway bandits?”

“Their offices are on the Capital Beltway, a road that circles the town.”

“They have offices? They must be a funny kind of bandit.”

“Washington is a funny kind of town.”

“What were you doing there?”

“I was leaving when I saw Jesse Jackson. If you want your teachers to put your weights up, if any of them mentions him, say that what made him famous was he was standing near Martin Luther King when he was shot and killed.”

“Put my weights up? What does that mean?”

“It means they’ll think you’re worthy of more respect.”

“Why do they describe it as putting your weights up?”

“It’s complicated. So, I prefer to think of it in terms of racehorses. The better a racehorse becomes, the more weight it has to carry.”

“Why?”

“So the other racehorses have a better chance of catching up to it and perhaps beating it in a race.”

“That sounds cruel.”

I smiled. “It’s a cruel world, kid.”

“Why did someone kill Martin whatshisname?”

“Martin Luther King. They killed him because he had a dream.”

This startled her. “They killed a man simply because he had a dream?”

“It was an important dream. He dreamed of a world where people would be judged by who there were and not by the colour of their skin.”

“That sounds like a good dream. Not one that should cause someone to kill him.”

“Like I said, it’s a cruel world.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever go to America if someone would kill you simply because you had a good dream.”

“I wouldn’t go either. Not these days. And I’d stay clear of Washington.”

When I drove to collect her from school I was attempting to lift a morose mood compounded by an unseasonable change in the weather. What had been a sunny, summery morning had turned into a wintery afternoon. So, to help brighten my day, I decided to deviate via Burns Road, arguably Sydney’s prettiest street, particularly near where it passes the *Bush School* in Autumn when it’s a leafy cavern with the limbs of the surrounding plane trees forming a green and golden, interlocking, canopy. But, although I had been there often, I suddenly took a wrong turn and became lost in a winding maze of narrow backstreets.

Beyond my muttered frustration at continually encountering narrow roads and laneways that swung away from the direction I wanted to go, I became aware that I was hearing a conversation on my radio where a man was describing how an abject fear of water had contributed to on-going mental problems. I had missed hearing what originally triggered his fear but assumed it related to being completely immersed in water as a child. Despite being distracted by where I had found myself in the back blocks of Wahroonga, I gleaned from what he was saying that he had been cured of his fear by being bathed within what he described as luxurious circumstance – complete, I imagined, with surrounding fragrant candles and perhaps even scattered rose petals – in a warm bath by an elderly woman with whom he had earlier established a platonic rapport.

Oh! for a similar release from my present circumstance, I may have muttered, being then trapped in a narrow dead-end street where a parked truck prevented me from turning around. Luckily, before I completely lost my composure, perhaps defying the weather by stepping out of my car and shaking my hands at the heavens while renting the air with expletives, the driver appeared and moved his truck so that I could execute a difficult, multi-point turn and extract myself from my claustrophobic confines. Feeling a

sense of relief akin to that of the former aquaphobe on my radio, I eventually managed to find my way back to the street from where I had entered the entombing maze.

And there it was, turned slightly askew so that I could read it clearly: the name of the street I had entered: 'Water'. At that point, with my car heater turned well up against the outside weather, I became aware that I too, in stark contrast to the freezing wind and swirling loose debris outside, was presently immersed in comforting warmth.

Who ever heard of a street named 'Water'? A crude sign by an obliging traveller where water could be found by anyone on a parched summer's day before houses and sealed roads disturbed the forest's serenity perhaps, but hardly a likely name for an established thoroughfare. Maybe the present name had replaced that original sign. If there are many streets in the entire world named simply 'Water' for any other reason, I would be surprised.

So – given what I was listening to on the radio accompanied by release from frustrating circumstance – I read this as not only an amazing coincidence, but as a personal message. A salient reminder to me to start writing my memoir.

After I collected my granddaughter from school, my passing on of more worldly wisdom was again prompted by her looking up from her phone.

"Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor has been arrested."

"Really! Prince Andrew?"

"No, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor."

"That's his new name. His name was Prince Andrew until recently."

"Did he change it because he wanted a more important sounding name?"

"No, Prince Andrew is a more important name. And he didn't change it. His brother, the King changed it. Why does it say he was arrested?"

She began to scroll up and down. "I think it said passing on state secrets or selling state secrets or something. What are state secrets?"

"Secrets that should be known only by the King, the Prime Minister, his cabinet and people from a few government departments."

"Not very secret secrets, then. Why do you think he passed them on?"

"Maybe he didn't know it was wrong. Or think it was wrong. Some Royals live on a different planet."

"Like Mars?"

“Yes, like Mars.”

“Why did the King change his brother’s name?”

“Because he could.” She didn’t need to know from me the kind of details she would almost certainly find out from others. So, I changed the subject. “Did any of your teachers mention what we talked about this morning: that Jesse Jackson had died?”

“No.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me!”

I didn’t impart much more worldly wisdom on the way home. I had a book to write and was still working on it mentally.

In the film *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray when attempting to describe to Andie MacDowell, how he knows everything about other people nearby, their names, their desires, and events he predicts before they happen; such as what people are going to say next, and a tray of plates crashing to the floor, he says that he is a god. But not, he believes, *The God*.

He believes he is a god of sorts because he has discovered he can do all the amazing things he demonstrates because he has lived the same day countless times and has learnt everything there is to know about the town of Punxsutawney in Pennsylvania and its inhabitants. I, on the other hand, believe I am a god of sorts because of my success in triggering coincidences.

Before my earlier declaration that I am the *Coincidence God* turned the more dubious of you glassy-eyed, I should point out that I am not inclined to make such declarations carelessly, because I am an arch-sceptic myself. If scepticism were an Olympic sport, I would feel confident of being picked in the national team.

As with Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*, I do believe I’m a god of sorts, but not *The God*. I can’t, for instance, create universes, cure sick people by simply waving a hand over them, or turn water into wine. And I can’t cure all the ills of the world. Mainly because there are too many. But, given my background and this remarkable ability I have with coincidence, I have been able to alleviate some of them.

More on that later.

On the subject of *The God* as opposed to lesser gods such as myself, I’m more of a combination of how *He* is portrayed separately in both the *Old* and *New Testaments of The Bible*. For instance, if I were to encounter bad people – or indeed evil people – I

would be more inclined to smote them, as was *The God* in the *Old Testament's* method of dealing with them, rather than turn the other cheek and love and forgive them. I'm more of a smoter than a forgiver. But I also believe that, at heart, I'm really a gentle soul; so, I do have some of the characteristics of the '*do to others what you would have them do to you*' philosophy of *The God* in the *New Testament*. And, upon discovering my god-like powers, I have endeavoured to use them for good rather than for bad or selfish purposes. At least, most of the time.

Again, more of that later.

First up, I'll tell you how I came to be aware that I had this amazing ability with coincidence.

Like many people in the world, I have experienced astonishing coincidences. Not the least with the aforementioned street named 'Water'. So astonishing, you would be forgiven believing there must be other things involved with what we term 'coincidence', perhaps even interference from a *Higher Authority*.

One of the more common forms of coincidence that people describe as 'amazing' is when two people who have known each other, perhaps years before at school, bump into one another at an unlikely location – a walking trail in Peru for instance – and believe that, considering the size of the population of the world, this should be described as 'amazing'.

"Not so amazing," sociologists and like-trained academics would rush to explain. *Given that the two people knew each other at school, probably came from a similar socio-economic background and had similar adventurous interests, their chances of bumping into one another during one of their journeys would be far from unlikely, because those who choose to trek in remote areas are a much smaller group than the entire population of the world."*

On the contrary, many of the coincidences I have experienced have been truly amazing, unencumbered by sound explanation.

Because I have experienced so many coincidences, I suspect that there may have been many others about which I was unaware. I refer to those that would have occurred when I was young enough to see and experience everything as new; young enough to be more amused, for instance, by how excited my mother became when showing me the moon, or a rainbow, or hail falling from the sky, than the phenomena of the moon, a

rainbow and hail itself. A coincidence during my early childhood would have brushed over me as just another new experience in a plethora of the new experiences that assailed me daily.

One of the amazing coincidences I experienced in more recent years was when I caught a glimpse of my mother walking past while I was held up in traffic in the main street of Cessnock in the Hunter Valley.

Cessnock is a bit off the beaten track and, although when I was young and my family lived at Maitland some 30 kilometres away, it wasn't somewhere we went for a weekend drive.

Since then, other than the rich alluvial flats near Maitland that help stock the fresh food shelves of the East Coast supermarkets with fresh vegetables, and kilometres of manicured vineyards near Cessnock that give fame at home and abroad to Hunter Valley wines, much of the south-eastern Lower Hunter had been turned into a dusty desert by hundreds of square miles of open-cut mines.

The mines pushed cattle grazing and the largest thoroughbred horse breeding area of the world into the north-western half of the valley, where the Upper Hunter grass-carpeted rolling hills and river flats have been about equally divided into broad, wire-fenced paddocks peppered with thousands of grazing cattle, and arrays of narrow, high wooden-fenced paddocks containing some twenty thousand long-legged thoroughbred brood mares and their equally long-legged foals.

This area was my mother's old stomping ground, and our relatives are nearly as abundant in the Upper Hunter as the aforementioned Beltway bandits are in Washington. Had I seen my mother walking down the main street of Scone in the heart of that district, I wouldn't have been anywhere near as surprised as catching sight of her in Cessnock.

I was obviously frozen by surprise. Because, before I could wind down my window and call out to her, she had turned into a laneway, and I was being jolted to get moving by the blast of a car horn behind me.

By the time I was able to park my car and race back to find her, she had disappeared. The laneway she turned into led to a car park, and I assumed she had driven off.

As I stood sweeping the area with my gaze I wondered, *What the fuck was she doing here?* Wondered. Silently. Because I keep my powder dry for any required delivery of an outburst containing a profanity. That was to give such outbursts a much greater impact whenever I did choose to unleash one among family, friends and associates.

This was before we were all armed with mobile phones; so, I rang her as soon as I arrived home in Sydney and we exchanged the reasons why we both had been in Cessnock: she, to buy a car when the model she was interested in wasn't available at a local dealership in Maitland where my parents were still living; and me taking a short cut that had been recommended to me that morning to carve off more than half an hour from a normal four-hour trip between Tamworth and Sydney. Compounding the unlikely chances of catching sight of her, she explained that she stayed only briefly because of being disappointed in the deal she was offered. Further discussion revealed that both of us had never been to Cessnock before.

Another coincidence I would label as *extraordinary* occurred when I was serving in the Australian navy during my early twenties, and the ship I was in returned unexpectedly to Sydney late on a Friday to carry out some minor repairs. I was unmarried at that time but engaged to be married to Jenny who, besides my parents, lived at Maitland. So, upon being excused duty, and seizing the opportunity to go home for the weekend, I headed for Central Railway Station where, deciding I could do with some well-earned extra comfort, booked a First-Class seat on the last train that stopped at Maitland that evening.

Weakly coincidentally, I suppose, considering my earlier anecdote, this train was known as 'The Cessnock Flyer' because of Cessnock being the town where it terminated. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that, because now a host of people, who have beliefs about mysterious interconnecting lines of force, will probably believe some of these involving coincidence must intersect at Cessnock.

After I took my seat and the train was about to leave, I believe I recognized the portly gentleman I noticed hurrying along the platform towards the carriage where I was sitting. He was hampered by his suitcase and, by the time he arrived, he was breathless from his exertions and having to compete for oxygen with a smoke-burping, steam-pissing, coaldust-reeking locomotive that had kept pace with him as it departed the station on a nearby track. By then, it was obvious that he had been booked into the seat next to mine. So, I helped him stow his suitcase before we both sat down and I waited for him to regain his breath. Because we had known each other for many years, our families being close friends, and because of other matters about to be explained, we exchanged pleasantries.

"Not so surprising, nor much of a coincidence," the aforementioned sociologists and like-trained academics would have again rushed to explain. *"You both live at Maitland,*

your families probably belong to the same socio-economic group. And this was the last train to get you both home before the weekend.”

I would have been inclined to agree with them, had my ship not come into Sydney unexpectedly, had the man not been sitting in the very next seat to me, had he travelled regularly to and from Sydney rather than once each year on business, had he not usually departed on an earlier train when he was in Sydney, had he not been Jenny’s father, and, after Jenny and I were married, had he not become the grandfather of our three children!

I could relate similar experiences I believe were extraordinary, but, at this point, will include only one more, because this one involves a circumstance where past, present and future time had blended. A circumstance where only the likes of the late Stephen Hawking would have likely remained unfazed.

A few years back, a popular British series on TV was *The Minder* and, heading the cast were George Cole and Dennis Waterman. One night I was sitting with one eye on a rerun of the show while the other was on a crossword. At a point where I had one elbow locked on the armrest of the lounge upon which I was sitting while rocking my forearm from side to side, I nudged Jenny, who was sitting beside me absorbed in a book.

“What’s a four-letter word for teeter?”

“Don’t tilt it!” George Cole called out at that precise moment to Dennis Waterman, who was struggling to shift a pinball machine to his advantage.

Two

The day that my Deification may have kicked in occurred when I was having a cup of coffee in England at an outside table of an eatery near the waterfront at Lyme Regis, of abundant fossils, Jane Austen and John Fowles fame.

“You’re an Australian,” announced a little girl who had wandered over from a neighbouring table and stopped to peer across at me.

“I am indeed. How do you know that?”

“My mother told me. She heard you talking.”

I looked across at a slim, high cheeked, woolly jumpered lady as she gave me a wave and warm smile. “Send her back if she annoys you,” she called out above the rumble of a passing van.

The little girl allowed the rumble to subside. “My name is Katie. What’s your name?”

“Inquisitive children never worry me.” I told her mother as I returned my attention to her bright-eyed, freckled-nosed, similarly garbed daughter. “Pleased to meet you, Katie. My name is John. How old are you?”

She held up four spread fingers. “Four. We live at Walla Ba Ba. Where do you live?”

I glanced back at her mother. “Is Katie saying, Wallabadah?”

Katie responded instead, and with obvious exasperation. “Of course I’m saying, Walla Ba Ba.”

“Well, that’s amazing, Katie. Because I lived at Wallabadah when I was as old as you.” I couldn’t remember when I had last mentioned Wallabadah. It surprised me at how easily it still rolled off my tongue. So, I said it again. “Wallabadah.”

A few minutes later, the three of us were sitting at the same table where we agreed that Wallabadah and its surrounds probably still had a tiny population, as it did in my day, thereby accentuating the coincidence that, not only did I know of it and knew where it was, I had also lived there.

Katie's mother, who introduced herself as Penelope "Call me Penny" Whitfield, explained that they didn't actually live in Wallabadah but not far along the road to Quirindi on a small property.

"It's not a small property," Katie interjected. "It's a big place with lots of cows, ten horses – no, eleven horses – six alpacas, four dogs, ten chooks and three houses," ticking them off on her fingers.

I acknowledged her contribution with a smile. "Well, I lived in the middle of town with no cows, three horses, no alpacas, two dogs, about twenty chooks, one big house and a stable. My father had the pub."

Penny displayed increased interest by raising a well-defined jaw. "Where do you live now?"

"Sydney."

"Who has the pub in Sydney now?" her wry smile indicative of her nationality, her country upbringing and that Katie's sense of humour was in good hands.

I later explained that I only lived in Wallabadah until I was about Katie's age, my parents having decided that a pub mightn't be the best place to raise me and my baby brother.

"So, we moved to Maitland where my father became a stock and station agent, calling on the experience he gained growing up on a cattle property."

"Do you know that the Wallabadah Cup is older than the Melbourne Cup?"

"I do. Every New Year's Day until recently, Dad stabled some of the horses at the pub. And even though I was your age, Katie – maybe even younger – I remember that I could hardly believe how small the jockeys' saddles were, being more used to standard-sized saddles."

Later, we exchanged our reasons for being at Lyme: Penny, with her husband Tom and with Katie in tow, spending most of their time searching for and photographing fossils, and I taking a break from travelling on the scenic route from Camelford in Cornwall to London.

Grimacing, Penny added that they weren't with Tom that day because of the wind turning far too icy. Where we were sitting near where the A3052 motorway changed from Pound Street to Broad Street, we were protected from that wind by a high brick wall at an adjoining eatery.

When I learned that they were also staying at the nearby Rock Point Inn, after I extracted a promise from her that they would all join me for dinner where I would

reserve a table with a view of the waterfront, we rose and separated; I peeling off to the right to return to the inn to make the dinner booking, while Penny and Katie peeled off to the left to head for a bookshop on the opposite side of the road.

“And get Tom to bring along photographs of his most interesting fossils,” I called out when they were still within earshot.

The wind had lifted, sending bursts of spray from the sea and clusters of tourists away from the beach and onto the footpaths of neighbouring streets. When I was about halfway back to the inn, I was distracted by the wail of a siren on what sounded like a rapidly approaching police car somewhere ahead of me where the continuation of the A3052 became Bridge Street.

Unbeknown by anyone nearby, dramas of some consequence involving two cars – one, higher up the hill in Pound Street, and the other, the one that triggered the approach of the police car in Bridge Street – had been evolving for some time.

On the hill in Pound Street, a local identity popularly known as Old Bailey was having what would later be described as a medical emergency. He had earned himself the sobriquet ‘Old Bailey’ simply because he was old and his surname was Bailey. That, and being a bit of a character. It had nothing to do with his having any unfortunate association with England’s Central Criminal Court in London.

Conversely, the drama that had been evolving in Bridge Street did include someone whose propensity for robbery would likely cause him to have an unfortunate association with England’s Central Criminal Court. Not only did Liam O’Connor have a propensity to rob tourists of their wallets and handbags whenever he saw the opportunity, he also had a penchant for stealing their motor vehicles. Unfortunately for him, his breaking into a car in Bridge Street, hot-wiring it and then racing off towards Broad Street, was witnessed by two members of the local constabulary who had been keeping an eye on him. Hence their pursuit with the siren wailing.

Old Baily’s situation was even more serious.

Upon climbing into his car, turning on the engine and releasing the handbrake, he was suddenly beset by a seizure that had him – with little to no control over what he was doing – switching the engine off again and knocking the gearstick into Neutral. This caused the car to roll away from the footpath and begin to increase speed as it headed down Pound Street. At that point, whereas whatever was ailing him prevented him from exerting enough pressure on the brake pedal to arrest the car’s rapidly increasing decent of the street, with his hands clamped seemingly ferociously to the

steering wheel and his mouth locked in a matching fierce grimace – as was described by a pedestrian who was forced to leap out of the way – he was able to influence some control over the direction it was heading. This caused him to miss the only three cars coming towards him at that time and to scrape past only a few of those parked on either side, knocking off their protruding rear-vision mirrors. These minor altercations with other cars and an occasional protruding wall did nothing to arrest the car's accelerating speed.

Ahead of him at the bottom of the hill, Penny, having just taken Katie's hand while stepping from the footpath, had turned away from Pound Street, being similarly distracted as me by the wailing of the siren of the rapidly approaching police car in Bridge Street.

At that point, for some reason, I turned back to where I had left them and received a staggering shock. What appeared to be an out-of-control car was rushing down the hill towards them as silently and ominously as a great shark bearing down on a victim with its jaws agape.

"Look out!" I yelled as loudly as I could and pointed towards the danger. But Penny either did not hear me or misunderstood where the threat lay, because she remained looking past me at the entrance to Bridge Street where O'Connor's car and his pursuers had now materialized amidst a swirl of mist-infused spray from the sea.

So, I shouted as loudly as my larynx would allow or sustain the one word I knew would attract her attention: "Wallabadah!"

Switching her gaze to me, she turned to where I was pointing and, with little time to do anything else, snatched Katie up in a smothering hug.

Clouds of spray and mist were still sweeping in from the sea. So, that was the last I saw of them beyond a cluster of pedestrians before O'Connor's car shot out of Bridge Street as if fired from the mouth of a cannon. Moments later, it slammed into Old Bailey's car with a report like the explosion of a bomb. Both vehicles then leapt into the air and crashed back to the street in a steaming cloud of flying glass and metal debris. Seeing no sign of either Penny or Katie as I raced back, I thought for one horrible moment that they were trapped beneath the smashed cars.

I was at the point of throwing myself down and scrambling into the crumpled mess when Penny's call of my name from behind me caused me to be engulfed by a wave of elation as I turned to see she was standing upright and still clinging to Katie.

My chest was heaving as it had not done in years and my throat was barely able to sustain both speech and enough air to keep me from sinking to the road. “Are either of you hurt?”

Receiving in response a shake of her head and, noticing that she was trembling in a similar manner to me, I quickly escorted her towards where we had been sitting previously. I encouraged her to keep moving, as much to get us well away from where the air reeked with the stench of petrol, as to allow us both to sit down before we collapsed.

As as sat, Penny mumbled something from behind Katie’s cheek causing the little girl to press her trembling body more firmly against her mother’s. Apparently deciding that nothing could be said that would adequately express what we had witnessed or alleviate how close they had come to being killed, we watched in silence what could be seen of the crashed vehicles past sightseers who were gathering from the waterfront and nearby buildings.

Apparently, both drivers were still alive, because the police, while keeping people back, were trying to administer first aid to both. Eventually, they must have concluded that nothing more could be done for them until ambulances arrived; so, they concentrated on redirecting traffic and keeping those wanting to assist well away.

By that time sirens heralded the arrival of several ambulances and Penny’s husband, Australian stockman-hatted, cumbersome jacketed, ashen-faced Tom Whitfield, who had rushed to the scene upon hearing some of what had happened. By then, both Penny and I had recovered enough speech to provide him with a more detailed description.

Shortly afterwards, Tom insisted that we adjourn to the comfort of the Rock Point Inn dining room well away from the reminder of how close he had come to losing both his wife and daughter.

As we were leaving, I heard someone among the onlookers say, “If either of those cars had arrived a moment earlier or later than they did, quite a few of us could have been lying here injured or worse.

Katie’s, “John lived at Walla Ba Ba”, elicited a firm hug from Penny and a threatened flood of tears in response to her daughter proving she had recovered from her initial shock and a prolonged and worryingly silence.

At some point, Penny turned and looked steadily me. “If you hadn’t shouted ‘Wallabadah’, I wouldn’t have seen the car bearing down on us and we would have remained stranded on the road,”

“I lost sight of you as soon as you grabbed Katie. I thought you may have remained stranded.”

“I somehow found myself on the footpath. I’m not sure if I ran back or leapt back onto it. I think both. The last thing I remember was that the car that was charging at us from the hill swerved suddenly into the path of the one being chased by the police.”

Tom’s gaze briefly touched both his wife and daughter. “Let’s not go over it again,” What are we having? Brandy, coffee, tea or hot chocolate?”

I glanced across at the bar. “I don’t think the bar’s open. But when it is, whatever I’m having, I’ll add a shot of brandy to it. What is recommended for survivors, by the way, or anyone suffering from a severe shock, is tea with plenty of sugar. But I’d rather settle for a hot chocolate.”

We all did, including Katie, and the kitchen staff was able to accommodate us.

Later, a news announcer on a nearby television set informed us that Old Bailey was recovering from both the accident and what his doctors believed was a minor stroke, and Liam O’Connor from two broken legs, prompting Tom to smile sardonically. “That will please the local Gendarmerie. Not having to mount a guard on him.”

I noticed that Tom had what would be described as designer stubble, his lightly bearded, neatly trimmed jawline almost certainly attributable to Penny, and was probably not an adornment this tall, broad shouldered, climate seasoned, fossil-interested grazier would have sported happily among any of his fellow New England cattlemen at a livestock sale or country show. Many of them were the grandsons and great-grandsons of troopers of the Australian 12th Lighthorse Regiment that had been largely recruited in the area. During the First World War, the 12th was one of the two regiments that captured the town of Beersheba in Palestine from the Turks after what has since been acclaimed as the world’s last great cavalry charge. And later it also helped liberate Damascus, making it safe for TE Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia to enter. Never mention Lawrence of Arabia to an old Lighthorseman.

I’ve found most New England graziers to be agreeable and friendly. But some of them consider themselves to be of superior breed. At first, I wasn’t sure in which camp Tom belonged: friendly and agreeable or “up themselves” as many of those I’ve chosen

to rub shoulders with over the years would label most people who weren't friendly and agreeable.

Other than while he was still suffering from shock when thanking me a bit self-consciously for my role in saving his wife and child, did he give me more than an occasional glance. It wasn't until I first visited them at Wallabadah and he invited me to take a bay mare for a ride around their front yard, that he treated me as anything like an equal. He had noticed me running my eye over the mare, which was tied to a hitching rail close to where they came out of their house to welcome me. And it was Penny's, "You have beautiful hands on a horse," as I dismounted from a gentle canter around the yard that prompted the change in the way he treated me. More so than later becoming aware of the quest I had undertaken.

As we sat drinking hot chocolate at Lyme, I contemplated it would have perhaps been of interest to him to know that my father was a former New England grazier himself and was also interested in fossils. And it would have certainly been of interest to him to know that my great-uncle Don, my grandmother's brother, had led the 12th Lighthorse Regiment at both Beersheba and Damascus. But he didn't know either of those things at the time and it remained for his wife's endorsement of my riding that stripped off any inherent reserve he may have been harbouring about me and revealed his true character, prompting me to place him in the agreeable and friendly camp.

"Men are funny little creatures, Katie." I heard Penny quietly confide to her daughter on more than one occasion during my visits to see them,

The next noteworthy incident in the development of my intriguing involvement with coincidence, occurred shortly after I returned to Australia, an involvement that challenged my intention never to use whatever ability I might have acquired for bad or selfish purposes. Although, in this case, the purpose could not be described as being really bad or particularly selfish. Or so I tell myself.

On the night it happened, my son-in-law Ryan and I were sitting on a couch watching television coverage of the Australian Soceroos playing against Japan in a World Cup qualifying match. If the Soceroos were to win, they would almost certainly qualify. If they were to lose or draw, their chances of qualifying would be uncertain. More uncertain to lose than to draw.

For close to ninety minutes, it was a terrible game for Australia. For most of the match, Japan was camped in Australia's half of the field being awarded numerous corner kicks and frequently firing off shots at goal.

Ryan and I attempted to relieve our anxiety by firing off our own shots at the Japanese players for having highlights in their hair, and at players on both sides for attempting to milk free kicks or a penalty by rolling around on the ground in apparent excruciating agony after a gentle bump that any player in the other football codes probably would not have even noticed.

Close to the ninetieth minute the score, seemingly miraculously, was still nil all. At that point both Ryan and I had acquired religion and were praying for a draw.

And then, right on the ninetieth minute, the Soceroos suddenly found themselves in Japan's penalty box. With skillful control of the ball close to the goal line, Soceroo Riley McGree kicked it back to fellow Soceroo Aziz Behich, who leapt off the ground and, rolling onto one side with the grace of an Olympic high jumper, unleashed a curving thunderbolt of a shot past the outstretched hand of the Japanese goalie into the back of the net.

Ryan and I leapt from the couch as if it had suddenly erupted in flames and released wild shouts of delight.

Ryan eyed me quizzically when we finally regained some composure. "What was that word you shouted just before he kicked the ball into the net?"

"I don't remember."

"It sounded like, 'Walla something'."

"I don't remember," Lying again.

But later I confessed all, opening with, "What would you say, Ryan, if I told you I may have helped Australia get into the World Cup!"

Three

Feeling somewhat guilty for being far from altruistic when seeming to have proven I definitely did have some control of coincidence, I was left pondering how I could atone by using this ability – dare I say, superpower – only for the good or benefit of mankind.

I had by then conceded that I could not cure all the ills of the world because of there being too many. One of the courses I had considered embarking upon was attempting to do something to alleviate the suffering of wild animals that were kept in captivity in horrendous circumstance by cruel people for the amusement of others or doubtful medical reasons; so horrendous I will not go into any more detail here █ for fear it would provoke nightmares in gentle folk █ other than to mention a film clip I saw where the use of small fishhooks were used to restrain a large bear, causing me to be engulfed by such a surge of rage that I rose from my chair and strode about the room with my fists clenched vowing that, if ever I came upon a similar scene, I would wreak pitiless havoc on the culprits. However, subsequent investigation suggested that many other people with far more resources than I could call upon were already pursuing counteractive action in that area.

Reducing the prevalence of family violence in a similar headline grabbing manner and with similar effect to the Harvey Weinstein scandal on sexual harassment, was another course I was seriously considering, when a more likely candidate for my attention suddenly appeared over the horizon. The timing was spot-on because it happened shortly after Ryan and I had watched the football match between Australia and Japan and I was still somewhat euphoric and keen to decide what course to embark upon because of what had occurred.

I had decided to stay a few days at Surfers Paradise on Queensland's Gold Coast before returning home to Sydney. On the first morning of my intended stay, Robbie Burns poetical waxing about the best-laid schemes of mice and men bit me on the arse as it often seemed to do whenever I was feeling reasonably relaxed and at peace with the world.

I was walking along a footpath adjacent to the Esplanade that flanked the beach, when a group of about eight people turned a corner and walked directly towards me. I

moved to the street side of the footpath to let them pass, but they seemed to spread out deliberately as they neared me and it became immediately obvious that either I or some of them would need to move aside to avoid colliding. At that point, I noticed that all but one of them were dressed casually. The one who wasn't was surrounded by the others in what appeared to be a protective manner, and was garbed more formally in a beige linen suit, matching shoes and a fancy top-pocket handkerchief. He seemed to be older than the rest who had much of the confident swagger and way about them of Gold Coast beach boys.

As I was already on the edge of the footpath, my only option was to step onto the road, which I was reluctant to do because this would have put me dangerously close to speeding traffic. Although this would have been obvious to them, because they all seemed to be watching me intently, none of them altered his course. When their supercilious manner and tight smiles suggested they were expecting me to get out of their way, I resolved to stand my ground.

This wiped their smiles but not their intent, because the one closest to me, a solidly built man, dropped his shoulder and knocked into me. I had my legs spread to counter the half-expected collision. But I still had to put one foot on the street to maintain my balance.

At that point, I probably should have conceded that I was outnumbered and been content that nothing other than my dignity had been damaged, and avoided exacerbating the situation by either verbally expressing my displeasure or physically retaliating. But, when a few of them glanced derisively at me and chuckled as they walked past, my anger overrode any sensible response on my part.

First, I released an expletive I rarely used at the one who had bumped me. Next, when he turned back and threw a punch at my head, I ducked out of the way and hit him with a short jolting blow to his midriff that put him on his backside gasping like a stranded trout. Immediately sensing a punch coming from behind, I moved to one side and swung my bent left forearm around like an elevated scythe to catch my new would-be assailant high on the neck with my elbow just below his left ear. He collapsed to the footpath as abruptly as if his legs had been cut from beneath him. This momentarily seemed to stun the others because their attention wavered between me, their two colleagues who were down, and the man in the linen suit whom they had apparently been charged with protecting.

Suddenly, amidst a blast of sirens and screeching of brakes, we were enveloped by a mass of new arrivals spilling out of un-marked cars shouting, “Police!”

Before I was separated from the rest, the man in the linen suit and I briefly matched gazes. I don’t think I have ever before been confronted by a stare of such malevolent loathing. So, I tried to match his obvious derisive, black-eyed appraisal of me with my best, “What are looking at?” stare.

Before I pointedly turned my back on him, I noticed that the policeman who had hold of my arm – we’ll call him Bill – obviously noted the silent exchange of derision between me and linen-suit man; my contribution, the equivalent of a gentle slap compared to linen-suit man’s stab of a dagger. Bill then directed me towards one of the cars that had stopped, bundled me into the back seat and climbed in after me.

He clipped in his seat belt and pointed for me to do the same. “What’s your name?”

I told him and asked him who he was.

“A Chief Superintendent in the Queensland Police is all you need to know. Where are you staying?”

I told him and noticed that he caught the driver’s eye in the rear vision mirror.

I took a moment to observe him closely and noted that, with his rugby forward’s cauliflower ears and a nose that resembled a miniature representation of a diver executing an incomplete forward somersault with pike, he probably was someone testosterone fueled drunks would give a wide berth on a Saturday night rather than test their pugilistic skills.

“Are you staying by yourself.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know who that was in the suit?”

“No.”

“His name is Mehmet Dogan.”

“Never heard of him. Why have I been arrested? I was the victim back there.”

“From what I saw, you didn’t look like much of a victim. Where did you learn to defend yourself like that?”

“I get around.”

“So it appears.”

“I ask again, why have I been arrested?”

“Nobody said you’ve been arrested.”

“Then what am I doing here?”.

“I’m saving your life.”

“That sounds dramatic.”

“I don’t care how it sounds. Where do you live?”

“Sydney.”

“Did you drive to Surfers or come by plane?”

“I came by plane. How did you react so quickly to what happened back there?”

“We’ve been watching that lot all morning. How long did you intend to stay in Surfers?”

“I plan to leave at the weekend.

“You’ll be leaving before then. You’ll be leaving today.”

“I just arrived. There’s no way I’ll agree to leave today.

“If you’re not on the first flight to Sydney when we take you to the airport, I will arrest you.”

“What? Why?”

“Because we’ve been getting enough grief from the public lately over domestic violence murders. We don’t need an organized crime one.”

“You think he’ll come after me.”

“He won’t. But someone will. If you didn’t recognize the death stare he levelled at you, maybe you need to get around more often.”

“If you know he’s into organised crime, why don’t you lock him up?”

“He has a good lawyer.”

“Were any of those others arrested?”

“We wouldn’t waste our time. They’d be out before the ink dried on the paperwork.”

He wasn’t joking about my leaving on the first plane to Sydney. Back at my hotel, after he had insisted on helping me pack and I had settled the bill, he had the driver take us directly to the airport where he watched an attendant hand me a boarding pass and check in my luggage. When I then expected him to leave, he waited with me in the departures area until my plane was about to leave. When the call came for passengers to embark, he flashed an identity card and walked beside me to the plane and watched me strapping myself into my seat. At least he gave me a friendly smile and lifted his hand in farewell before he departed.

Talk about being run out of town!

When I arrived in Sydney, as I was collecting my luggage, my phone beeped. The message was as brief and unencumbered as my chat with Bill: “I need to see you immediately.”

I texted back: “Where are you?”

“Canberra.”

I swallowed an expletive, and, after a moment’s hesitation, I reluctantly carried my luggage across to a check-in counter.

I met him that evening at a restaurant in Manuka near where I had booked a room at the Pavilion Hotel.

We’ll call him Dick. I hadn’t seen him recently and the most generous description of his appearance that came to mind was that he looked terrible. Gone was the tall, attractive man who would turn women’s heads when I first met him, obliterated by his present projected demeanour to a degree that he would now catch the eye only of those who would have wondered what was ailing him.

Had he not stood up and waved to catch my attention as I entered the restaurant, I may not have recognised him. His eyes were sunken, his skin was blotchy, his hand trembled as he shook mine and his voice was little more than a raucous croak.

Despite knowing how he would respond, I opened with, “How have you been?”

“Don’t ask. What don’t you understand about my direction to keep a low profile?”

“I read it as advice, not a direction. And it’s so long since I did any work with your lot, I wouldn’t have thought that the height of my profile was any concern of yours.”

“I would have thought than any other organization that has been able to afford your exorbitant fees would be equally unhappy about any cavalier, or potentially news-worthy activity on your part involving Mehmet Dogan.”

Although Dick and I could be considered friends of sorts, mainly for having shared what the Chinese would call, ‘interesting times’, the use of abrupt somewhat feisty exchanges was our usual way of communicating with each other; exchanges that to an observer would have suggested that we were more enemies of sorts than friends of any attenuation.

“Who is Mehmet Dogan?”

“You don’t know?”

“I have no idea. The cop who threw me out of Surfers was more interested in seeing the back of me than risk delaying my departure by scaring me into giving him the slip and putting in place whatever protective action regarding Dogan I believed was required.”

“He read you right, didn’t he, this cop? Particularly the scaring you bit.”

“You wouldn’t like having your back unnecessarily exposed to a dangerous bastard either. But unlike you and your lot, my first move would have been to affect a sit-down rather than anything more dramatic. And you still haven’t told me: Who is Mehmet Dogan?”

“He’s the kingpin, money-manager of a people smuggling operation. And he owns three mansions on a bend of the Nerang River on the Gold Coast with a lifestyle to suit. The middle mansion is occupied by him, and the ones on either side by his parents and in-laws; a’la the late Barry Sheene. Except Dogan’s ways are far from resembling Sheene’s humanity and philanthropy; in fact, his ways could be described as the direct antithesis of philanthropy.”

“I wouldn’t have thought smuggling an occasional boatload of refugees from Sri Lanka or anyone else in our region into Australia would buy you three mansions on the Gold Coast and a lifestyle to suit.”

“You’re right. It wouldn’t. That’s why he would rarely bother with the Australian end of the trade. Where his interest lies is in smuggling people from the poorer parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East into Europe.”

“Then, why does he live on the Gold Coast?”

“If you were the kingpin, money-manager of one of the largest people smuggling enterprises in the world, where would you want to spend most of your time? Somewhere in Western Europe where Interpol would be harassing you daily and using every excuse they could think of to lean on you. Or in Eastern Europe or the Middle East where about a dozen mafia look-alike cartels and an equal number of dodgy states would be aching to get their hands on you?”

He placed a trembling hand against his mouth. “Or would you prefer to be swanning about on Queensland’s Gold Coast where you can do all you need to do on your computer or phone in the sanctuary of your own home?”

As he was talking, he had no idea to what degree his probable attempt to have me steer well clear of Dogan was having the opposite effect. Dogan was now rapidly assuming the appearance of a worthy target for my new-found – dare I say again –

superpower. I was even beginning to sense that I was receiving coincidence-related collaboration of this by a coincidence that was evolving around me. The waitress who took our order for drinks told us her name was 'Nicole' the same as my elder daughter. And, before we had even decided upon beers, a little girl at a neighbouring table yelled, "Stop that, Scott!" Scott was my son's name. In a burgeoning euphoric mood from believing I may have identified my sought-after target, I felt I had no need to confirm that the name of little girl who had admonished her brother was called 'Sam', my younger daughter's name.

Dick broke my euphoric musing with, "What do you know about people smuggling?"

"Not a lot. I'm aware that the smugglers have tricked many young women into prostitution on the promise of getting prestigious work. And I'm aware that hundreds of people have been drowned on overloaded boats in the Mediterranean and English Channel."

"Then, like most people, you've only seen the tip of the iceberg. And missed realising that people smuggling and its related human trafficking industries are the most monstrous activities mankind has been involved with since the slave trade."

When he replied to any of my questions, it was often with muttered lengthy outbursts that were frequently interrupted mid-sentence, sometimes mid-word, by pauses and deep intakes of breath which would drive you mad if I attempted to replicate them here.

His raised voice caused me to touch my lips and glance across to where the boy Scott and the little girl I fancifully believed was called Sam, along with their parents, were sitting. It was early in the evening, and there were few others present. Also, Dick had chosen a table where it was unlikely that a conversation carried out at a normal auditory level would be overheard. But he didn't seem to realise that what he occasionally shouted was unsuitable for the ears of Scott and his little sister.

"If what you say is true. And I have no reason to doubt you. Tell me what is beneath the tip of this iceberg you mention."

Because what he went on to describe was in a manner typical of his propensity to be verbose, despite the seriousness of the subject I was tempted at times to interrupt him with a shout of, "INCOMING!" and dive beneath a table, as was a method I had occasionally used in the past to inform an instructor or whoever to get to the point. But, mindful of where we were and not wanting to frighten Scott and his sister or any of the

other people present, I did so only silently on occasions and refrained from diving beneath a table.

Although he was trying to conceal the extent of his anger, the effort of now keeping his voice down had caused him to become red in the face, and saliva to spill onto his bottom lip through his gritted teeth, reinforcing my conviction that he was far from being in the best of health. “What’s beneath the tip of the iceberg is a seething corruption. And at the very center of that corruption, is one Mehmet-fucking-Dogan.”

The gaze by which he had me gripped, suddenly intensified. “How do I know that? The same way I found out so quickly about your shenanigans with his bozos in Surfers. I know it because the powers-that-be have put me in charge of nailing him. Talk about being handed a poisoned chalice!” He held up a hand with his fingers spread so that the tremble was obvious. “Look what a prolonged look into that heinous abyss has done to me.”

“How did Dogan become kingpin in one of the largest people smuggling enterprises in the world?”

“*The Purple and Gold Adventure Holidays Corporation* to be precise. Originally based in Syria. God knows where it’s now based after Assad was kicked out.

“He has a doctorate in finance from Sydney University and got to where he is by proving himself, not only to be a financial genius after being recruited by the smugglers, but also by having a flair for the management of the recruitment and deployment of those who carried out the smuggling along with those who were smuggled. He also had an ability of tricking those who were smuggled, along with their families, to sign up for massive debt they would never be able to service through lawful activities, thereby locking them and their loved ones into being beholden to the company and obeying their every demand, or risk being killed by his cohorts or sent to prison by the authorities.

“INCOMING!” I shouted silently and glanced at the closest neighbouring table.

“You mentioned the hundreds who have been drowned. Make that thousands. You mentioned that many of the young women who were smuggled had been tricked into prostitution on the promise of getting prestigious work. Make that, most of the young women. And add to that the thousands who have been bludgeoned to death or shot as a lesson to others for disobeying orders, or have been asphyxiated in locked shipping containers, or have died from overdoses of the drugs they were forced to take. And that’s still only part of it. Because the families of those who have died are still paying

for the exorbitant amount of money that was borrowed by those who have died. Borrowed on the promise of a better life for their loved ones. Not eking out an existence as a slave in a brothel or clearing up toxic industrial sites to pay back the money they and their parents owed. Because of Grogan's money-gathering, extorting, laundering and investment skills, billions of American dollars and Euros are being made by his organization alone.

"INCOMING!" I again shouted silently but refrained from checking out nearby tables in case he thought I was losing interest. Which I was, because I already had enough information.

His gaze intensified even further. "If you dare shout, 'INCOMING!' I'll cripple you before you can get out of your chair!"

He couldn't. Not in his present state of health. But what he obviously could still do was read me like a book.

And his anger remained elevated as he continued. "Some of those families have even been forced to become involved with arguably – no not arguably, actually – the most odious activity of all: child trafficking. Either to be used as slaves for the rest of their lives or, while they are still young, the plaything of pedophiles."

He then thankfully sealed off with, "And I'll tell you something else. Having found out the extent of the evil bastard's activities, if I can nail him before the load of trying to nail him kills me, it will be the greatest day of my life".

This also sealed off my intention to target Mehmet Dogan in particular and people smuggling in general.

As we were leaving the restaurant later that evening, I opened the door for the parents of their now sleeping children to move past us. Their mother, who was carrying the little girl, turned to their father. "I'll put Sam straight to bed when we get home. But you had better take Scott to the bathroom before you put him down."

As we stepped onto the footpath, Dick glanced at me. "Why the smile?"

"One day, I may tell you how I knew that little girl's name was Sam," I ignored his added attention and chose to distract him. "It was pretty stupid for Dogan's lot, particularly when they were based in Syria, to call their organization, 'The Purple and Gold Adventure Holidays Corporation'."

He moved to the curb to hail a taxi that was approaching. "Why?"

"They obviously adopted it from Byron's '*The Destruction of Sennacherib*' where:

'The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,

His cohorts all gleaming in purple and gold.'

Followed shortly after by:

'For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,

And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed.'

Not very smart to relate their organisation to the predatory instincts of a wolf and the homicidal nature of the angel of death.”

Dick appraised me over a scowl as we stepped into the taxi. “My money would be on them warning off potential competitors.”

“It could also indicate that, among the leading lights of their organization, they have a British connection. And a stupid one at that. Some Brit fan of Byron highlighting his literary credentials at the expense of exposing his organisation’s criminality.”

By the time the taxi dropped me off at the Pavillion Hotel and raised my hand in farewell to Dick, who had further to go, my mind was almost entirely preoccupied with one question: Now that I have identified my target, what do I do next?

Four

The answer came to me the first morning I woke up in my own bed back in Sydney. Maybe my subconscious gave me a nudge in the direction I should take while I was sleeping. I've always believed that my subconscious is smarter than me.

Dick had said that Dogan was a genius. I'm pretty smart myself, but I wouldn't call myself a genius. However, I knew someone who was and, being confident that her smarts could match anyone's smarts, I decided to see if I could recruit her.

I made enquiries and was told by one of her close relatives that, because it was Sunday morning, she would presently be watching two of her great-granddaughters playing soccer. When I arrived where I was told they were playing, I spotted her sitting on a complimentary plastic chair on the edge of one of several soccer fields where girls of all ages, from those new to using their legs to those in their late teens, were playing. The air was alive with bouncy music broadcast from a nearby grandstand. Among a smattering of fathers and a few grandfathers, mainly female onlookers, from grandmothers to teenagers, were bouncing in time with the music beside the fields, while toddlers were racing around on tiny bicycles. Those too young for even the ones with training wheels attached, were propelling themselves about on balance bikes. Babies who were too young to race around or dance unaided, were smiling and giggling while being cradled by laughing young mothers who were also jiggling and swaying along with the music.

As my gaze swept the sun-drenched scene in front of me, being very mindful of what was happening in other parts of the world on that day – particularly those in the Middle East or affected by the likes of one, Mehmet Dogan, I could not help thinking that we live in one of the luckiest countries in the world; if not the luckiest.

Her name was Ruth and, because I had known her forever and she never looked any younger, I reckon she must have been about 150. To be fair, she didn't look any older than 90.

I pulled up a spare chair beside her and sat down. "Hullo, Ruthie."

She turned around with some difficulty and looked at me for several seconds before she spoke. “If you want to chance getting a smack on the ear, try calling me Ruthie again.”

I chuckled and tried to give her a hug which she shrugged off. “What do you want, you rude bastard? You never call. You never write. You’re no better than most of the men I’ve ever known.”

“I need your help, Ruthie.”

She returned her attention to the soccer. “Of course you need my help. You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

I also turned to the soccer. “Which ones are yours?”

“The best-looking ones, of course. Why do you need my help?”

So, I told her. I wasn’t sure if she was listening closely because she regularly interrupted what I was saying to release occasional bursts of encouragement to the players and displeasure at the performance of the referee and linesmen.

At one point, the game we were watching was interrupted by a little boy on a balance bike propelling it slowly across the middle of the field to the amusement of the players and even the broadly smiling referee, who all stood watching until he was well clear. By the time the referee blew his whistle to restart the game, the boy’s embarrassed mother, who had been trailing too far in his wake to reach him, finally managed to catch up and laughingly admonish him.

Ruth chuckled. “That kid. How old do you think he is? About three. Reminds me of someone who thinks everything is about him.” She smiled provocatively. “Can’t think who.”

When the game ended, she shooed me away but gave me plenty to cling to by telling me to call her the following week, adding that, because of what I had told her, I would also need to contact the Bull Ant and have him send her all that he discovers.

That was encouraging. It could mean that, not only had I probably recruited one ally in Ruth, but there was also a chance that, with her endorsement, I might be able to recruit the bull ant.

Bull Ant was the name I and a few associates gave to a brilliant IT nerd we had used occasionally in the past. A former colleague had given him that name when he couldn’t remember the name of the hacker sidekick of a tough Scandinavian female Goth in popular fiction. He thought it might have been, Hornet or something similar.

A bull ant was appropriate to the task I had decided to embark upon. As anyone who has been bitten by one can attest, it counts for nothing; who you are, who you think you are or if you're a prince or a pauper, once you've been bitten by one. The pain envelopes you with such intensity, you can't even tell from where it's coming, let alone recall who you are or how much much money you have. And even if you could, neither one nor the other would be of any help whatsoever.

I caught up with him after some difficulty in persuading a known associate of his that I was still one of the good guys and had no intention of harming him. He had set himself up in an apartment above a shopping mall in the centre of Sydney.

He opened his door for me electronically after he had obviously checked it was me on a camera and, as I entered the room where he was sitting behind a desk that dwarfed the size of the laptop in front of him, he nodded to a chair opposite him without taking his eyes from the screen of the laptop or his fingers from performing a flamenco dance on its keyboard.

I remained on my feet taking in the view through the nearest window until he stopped typing, closed the laptop and came to join me.

As I reached out to shake his hand, he moved in close and gave me a quick hug and accompanying pat on the back, perhaps to make up for the lack of even a perfunctory greeting as I arrived.

"How are you travelling, Ant? Not too badly if the quality of your Italian and Norwegian furniture and a view of the harbour to the heads is any indication."

He motioned for me to sit on one of a group of easy chairs positioned around a low table beneath the windows and sat down close to me. "With what I deal with on a regular basis, I had to cheer myself up somehow." He lowered his brow and observed me for a moment through a few curls of hair that had spilled loose from the unruly mop on the top of his head. "Ruth told me to expect you."

"How much did she tell you."

"Enough to attract my interest. Particularly as it concerns someone whose evil activities I've been asked to look into before."

"Who by?"

"Besides your mate in Canberra, what was the name of the cop who threw you out of Surfers?"

I told him and he smiled. "Well, there's a coincidence I was half expecting."

"You're not the only one," I responded.

“How do you mean?”

“One day when we have more time, I’ll tell you. Why were you half expecting he’d be the one?”

“He’s as keen on nailing the bastard as much as your mate in Canberra.”

“Well, I hope you know him well enough to have him turn a blind eye if he ever spots me again in Surfers. I’ll have to go back and, when I do, I don’t want him to march me out of town as unceremoniously as he did last time.”

“What’s your budget on this.”

“I’m hoping you’ll come on board pro bono. I’ll cover expenses of course.”

“Will you cover them for my son as well. I might need his help.”

“You have a son! I didn’t know you were married.”

“Who said I was married?”

“Of course I’ll cover them for him. Anybody who can be of help to you must be pretty smart.”

“He’s smart alright. Want to meet him now. He’s out the back and, being a teenager, he’s still asleep.”

“A teenager.”

I must have allowed some concern to creep into my tone, because he came back quickly with, “He’s nineteen with similar IT smarts as mine. Sydney Uni gave him early entry, and he already has an undergraduate degree in computer science. As you are probably aware, we oldies have nothing on kids when it comes to the world of cyberspace. And no wonder. In cafes, you see babies playing with their mother’s smart phones.”

His son’s name was Oliver, but after Ant introduced him, he said to call him ‘Spider’. A daddy long legs was what came to mind as he shook my hand with a firm grip before slumping into a chair.

I filled Spider in with what I knew about Mehmet Dogan and his world. He seemed to take it in, despite his occasional responses being accompanied by wide yawns that must have come close to dislocating his jaw. Because his responses were pertinent, I put the yawns down to his sleep having been interrupted rather than boredom. However, I became a little annoyed with him when I said that, from all accounts, Dogan ran the entire organisation with the use of no other digital equipment than his laptop and smartphone.

“No, he doesn’t,” he chirped in, releasing a high-pitched, “He, he, he, he!” that reminded me of the cackle of a popular cartoon hyena.

The level of my annoyance then lifted a touch when he repeated both the: “No, he doesn’t,” and the hyena giggle!”

I calmed myself by reflecting that his response triggered a pleasant memory of when my younger daughter was still a toddler.

“You remind me of when my wife Jenny and I played hide-n-seek with our daughter, Sam. While Jenny counted to ten in the kitchen, I’d carry Sam down to the lounge room and hide with her behind a big lounge chair. Jenny would know where we were as soon as she came down but pretend to look for us at the other end of the room.”

“I think she must be over here.”

“No, she’s not,” Sam would respond and release a high-pitched laugh not unlike your hyena giggle. At that age, she didn’t comprehend that remaining quiet was a prerequisite of hide-n-seek.”

Jenny would pretend not to have heard her, and continue to search about while repeating, “I think she’s over here.”

Every time she did, elicited another, “No, she’s not,” from Sam along with the giggle. I think she might have even realised that, by continuing to disagree with Jenny, injected a greater level of excitement and laughter when Jenny finally elected to discover us.”

Both Ant and Spider seemed to like my relieving anecdote. So, while they remained smiling, I directed my gaze at Spider, “Why do you think Dogan doesn’t only need his laptop and smartphone?”

“Because they wouldn’t have anywhere near enough grunt or memory capacity to run an operation of the size he’s running.”

“So, what else would he use?”

“A bank of servers,” Ant chimed in. He glanced at his son. “A big bank?”

“Pretty big if they’re old technology. Smaller if they’re state of the art.”

We then discussed where Dogan would likely keep them. Ant said that it would be unlikely they’d be anywhere overseas which would require him to communicate with them via undersea cable or international satellite and thereby be more susceptible to attack. “The safest place for him would be locally and nearby.”

“Where locally and nearby do you think? Surely not in his own basement.”

“No way. They’d require too much power and attract the attention of the drug squad. That lot are forever on the lookout for private residences using large amounts of power that would pinpoint the likely location of a cannabis crop.”

“Now that I believe you’re prepared to come on board, if not already on board, Ant. How soon can you and Spider decamp with me to Surfers? I’ve already checked out some real estate companies that use aerial drone coverage of the properties across the river from Dogan’s mansion. Some of the low-rise apartments facing directly at him rent holiday accommodation.”

“Give us a moment.” He signalled for Spider to move with him to the other end of the room.

While they spoke for a time in lowered voices, I rose from my chair and walked to a window where I was mesmerised for a time by Sydney’s famous fleet of 18-foot skiffs racing down the harbour at speeds across the wind that would have challenged that of power boats.

Ant eventually signalled for me to return to the chairs. “As long as Ruth comes on board, so will we. And, if she does, we can detach from here and come with you to Surfers on Monday.”

I immediately rang Ruth, switched my phone to speaker and, when she answered, confirmed she was by herself. I then told her she was on speaker and relayed what Ant had said.

“What’s your budget?”

“Of course I’ll cover all expenses. But I was hoping your humanitarian bent would have you come on board pro bono.”

She didn’t reply immediately, and I eventually asked if she was still there.

“Of course I’m still here,” she came back angrily. “We’ll need to have a council of war. Preferably at Surfers. How soon can you and Ant be there?”

“Monday.”

“If wherever you’re staying is at least four star and I would have a bedroom with an ensuite to myself, book me in from Monday to Thursday. And I warn you; I’ll be bringing my skimpiest bikini.”

I swallowed a laugh, “Looking forward to seeing you, Ruthie.”

“You won’t be when I clip you over the ear.”

“Ant is bringing his son Spider for backup.”

“Good! I’ve heard about him. By the way, I have to be back here to watch the kids playing soccer on the following weekend. So, be prepared to fill me in with everything I need to know the day I arrive. Pick me up at the airport. I’ll text you flight details.” Then, in typical Ruthie fashion, she concluded with, “You cheap bastard!” before hanging up.

“He, he, he, he!” Spider chuckled.

Five

The apartment I had settled upon was directly across the river from Dogan's house, which had a broad terrace and a swimming pool divided from the river by a stretch of lawn.

Upon arriving, I had placed a tripod-mounted telescope behind a lace curtain in the master bedroom so that, as long as the room was darkened, we could watch the front of the house through it unobserved.

After, arriving at the apartment, Ruth had short nap to recover from her flight and having to start the day earlier than normal. When she arose, she took a long look through the telescope before joining Ant, Tiger and me in the Livingroom. There, I also had pulled a similar lace curtain to the one in the bedroom across the window so that we could keep an eye out for any moment across the river. Provided none of us inadvertently switched on a light, we would remain unobserved.

She glanced at me as we all sat down. "Have you seen anything of him?"

"He had his breakfast on the terrace this morning, A maid brought it to him. From the lights that were on last night and the shadows moving about inside, a couple of others are staying there as well."

"Is his wife with him? Or a partner?"

"Not that I've seen."

Her gaze swept over us. "I'm assuming that none of you is carrying a weapon."

When we all assured her that this was the case, which pleased her, I decided to come clean on my new-found ability.

"Speaking of weapons. I believe I should declare a superpower."

This grabbed their undivided attention. So, while I had it, I gave them a few seconds to recover before continuing with. "Not only do I continually attract amazing coincidences, I've discovered that I can actually control when coincidences occur."

I was disappointed when, instead of being impressed by my courageous declaration, after staring at me silently for a few seconds, they all burst out laughing.

When they had recovered except for exchanging an occasional disrespectful smirk, Ruth turned her attention to Ant. “Putting aside for the moment that one of us might not be of sound mind, “What’s the plan?”

“We have to clone his laptop. We won’t have a clue what he’s doing or how he’s doing it otherwise.”

“How could you clone it?”

“Because our superpower friend here has had some clearance diving training, one way would be for him to swim across the river at night, break into Dogan’s house, find the laptop, somehow open it – modern laptops are not all that easy to open – place a bug in it, clean up so there is no evidence of what he has done, and get the hell out of there.”

“Apart from this not being Hollywood, the main problem with that scenario is, this is not Hollywood, I’m not Tom Whatshisname and I’m allergic to bull sharks.”

Spider displayed a level of disrespect for an elder that did him no favours. “Couldn’t you use your superpower to stun them?” And then reinforced it by releasing one of his hyena giggles.

Ruth gave him condescending look and turned to Ant. “Is there a safer way to clone it?”

“If we could find out where he keeps his servers, we could attach the bug where his laptop feeds into them.”

“Tell me about servers. Why does he need them? What do they do?”

“Mainly, they’re just more interlinked computers he can access. He needs them because his laptop doesn’t have anywhere near enough grunt or memory to run an operation of the size he’s running. The servers would give him both. Heaps more grunt and data storage.”

He went on to explain they would need to be housed in a building that had a controlled environment with stable air conditioning and cooling for the servers in the form of heat exchangers.

“Would that need someone monitoring it twenty-four seven?”

“Yes.”

“Locally or remotely?”

“Locally would be safer. Someone on site to take immediate action if anything went wrong.”

“Are there any others in the area who would use similar servers?”

“Yes, all the financial institutions. Banks and insurance offices and the like that have lots of customers and plenty of daily activity. Most of them use large off-site data centres these days, which means they don’t have to rely on the ones they have on-site, but they would still keep them operational to maintain a level of immediately available in-house grunt and memory capacity, and in case of needing them in an emergency, such as when the off-site centre crashed for any reason.”

“Someone get me some more coffee and all of you give me some time to think,” Ruth responded.

I poured more coffee for all of us, prepared some more and, after Ruth had consumed most of hers, she seemed to switch to a comatose state with her eyes barely open, the rest of us took our coffees to the window to watch where Dogan had emerged from his house, seemingly wearing only a dressing gown to sit beside the pool and study his phone.

Shortly afterwards, Spider brought our attention to someone emerging from the house. “This one is a cool dude. Long silver hair tied in a ponytail and wearing a baseball cap.”

When the man walked across to Dogan with a confident swagger and pulled up a chair beside him, I decided to take a closer look at him. I then left them for a couple of minutes to go into the master bedroom to watch him through the telescope and take a photo.

When I returned, I showed it to them. “That’s not a baseball cap he’s wearing. It’s a Lord’s cricket cap. He’s a Pom. And, by the way he seems to be full of himself and treating Dogan as an equal rather than his boss, my guess he’s a partner or at least a senior member of the syndicate come to visit.”

Ruth agreed after examining the photograph and signalled for us to sit back down. She then directed her attention back to Ant. “When these financial institutions use their on-site servers, do they use all of them?”

“No. They’d switch them in and out depending on traffic. And they’d probably have plenty of built-in redundancy, some servers in reserve they’d rarely use, but have them there in case of the emergency I mentioned; the remote data centre shutting down for any reason.”

“Would that occur often?”

“No. The data centres are pretty reliable and would automatically switch to emergency generators that would flash up pretty quickly if they lost mains power for instance.”

“Right! Just as I thought.” She then swept us with her gaze before continuing. “I, like most other lazy bastards on the planet, have lived by the creed that it’s smarter to have someone else push a wheelbarrow for you than push it yourself. So, it would be smarter for Dogan to use redundant servers in one of these banks or insurance companies than to set up his own. That way, he wouldn’t have to buy them or pay for the power they use. Also, they’d be operating in the right ambient environment with all the cooling they’d need.” Again, she directed her attention to Ant. “Do you agree?”

“I do, and he would probably need an inside man in that organisation to ensure they weren’t ever switched in for any normal purpose when he was using them.”

“Exactly,” she agreed, with an expression that suggested she was ahead of him. “That’s why I want you and Spider to check if someone in charge of IT at any of these places Dogan might use has a lifestyle that doesn’t reflect their normal income. I also want you to come up with ways to take the servers out of action or interfere with the way Dogan communicates with them.”

I was getting a bit sick of Ruth’s imperious attitude, particularly when dealing with Ant, whom I liked to interact with on an equal and friendly basis.

She looked at me. “While I was sleeping, did you hire another car like I told you to do?” I snapped back with, a bit more forcefully than I intended with: “Of course I did. You know your wish is my command.”

“It was a command! My time here is paramount. I don’t want any of it wasted. After Ant and Spider drop me off at the beach and are cruising around with an eye out for a possible location of Dogan’s servers, I want you to visit local Vietnamese support groups and see if you can find out if anyone knows how he organises the loans for the people he smuggles. From my investigations, it’s the loans and how he invests them that are the backbone of his industry. We need to know that up front so we’ll know the best way to spike his guns. Given the nationality of many of those who have recently been drowned, Vietnam seems to be a popular target for smugglers; so, the Vietnamese who are living here may have the answers we need.”

“Most of the Vietnamese who live here came shortly after the Vietnam War and would predate Dogan’s activities.”

My response was probably unhelpful and deserving of her counterpunch. “They’re still settling here regularly and making a wonderful contribution to our society,” she snapped. “Besides those who attend Vietnamese support groups, those working in Vietnamese restaurants that have opened recently, could also have information on how he operates. Which means you have a wide area to cover. So, the sooner you get cracking, the better.”

Meanwhile, movement across the river at Dogan’s house, caused Spider to rise and walk to the window and signal for Ant to join him.

Ruth had begun to test my patience. I was still simmering from the way my bold coincidence declaration had been treated so cavalierly by all of them, and her remark about my not being of sound mind particularly rankled. So, as I rose to leave and head for the door, I decided to do something about it.

Before I had a chance to say anything, Spider suddenly released a louder than normal one of his hyena cackles. Along with hoarse gasps to get his breath, he managed to blurt, “He’s into more than smuggling people.”

This brought Ruth to her feet and both she and I to move to Spider’s side where we saw that Dogan, had stripped off his dressing gown and was carrying out energetic calisthenics wearing only a pair of skimpy bathers in apparent preparation for taking a swim.

Spider then caused Ruth to release a clipped giggle and pat him on the back when he added in explanation of his outburst, “He’s also into smuggling budgies.”

Until that moment, I had planned to admonish Ruth and exercise my power of command by first catching her attention with a loud, “Ruth!” and then assail her with John Turturro’s line from the Cohen Brothers’ film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* “Who elected you leader of this outfit?”

I had even practiced it under my breath as I turned from the door. But her sudden change of demeanour must have been instantaneously contagious. Because her giggle and good-humoured pat on Spider’s back, not only caused me to cave, but suddenly move closer to her side and wrap an arm around her shoulder before she could react. “You know I love you, Ruthie. Even when you’re being a cranky old bugger. And I’m glad I invited you to join us because of your smarts, some of which you’ve already demonstrated.” I then kissed her on the cheek and ducked away beneath the swipe she aimed at my ear before I quickly headed for the door. As I lifted a hand to her in farewell, I believe that, despite her attempt to hide it, she was smothering a smile.

Six

After I stepped into my car, I carried out a check on my phone for Vietnamese support groups in the area and found the first one listed was at the town of Nerang about 10 kilometres away. The coincidence of Nerang being the same name of the river that Ant had suggested – assumedly tongue in cheek – that I swim across to place a bug in Dogan’s laptop was perhaps a prompt for me to check on that support group first. But the reaction to my coincidence declaration by the others had soured my confidence in coincidences. And closer investigation of the Nerang group suggested it mainly supported Australian Vietnam veterans. So, I decided to concentrate first on some of the nearby Vietnamese restaurants.

The first one I entered was in the centre of Surfers near Cavill Avenue.

I received a shock when, as I entered it, I was met with a double-barrelled scream of, “Johnny!” And then being embraced in dual smothering hugs from two former Vietnamese colleagues whom I hadn’t seen in over a decade, Vuong and Mai Pao. The few diners present were then made party to an extended greeting of me by three small children, a boy and two girls, who, despite not having a clue who I was, had nevertheless exploded from the kitchen to cling to my legs and echo their parents’ enthusiastic words of greeting.

“What a coincidence! What a coincidence!” Vuong was saying. “Now we’re back on the East coast, we must find out where Johnny is. Only this morning, I said it. Only this morning, wasn’t it, Mai?”

“Only this morning,” Mai concurred. “You bad man! Why you not get in touch? Ten years! More than ten years!” she was speaking so close to one of my ears I could feel the warmth of her breath. “Why haven’t we heard from you for more than ten years?”

“Because you’ve been in Darwin, mainly,” I offered as poor excuse for my inaction.

“Sit down. Sit Down,” Vuong attempted to direct me to the nearest chair, but with some difficulty because of his wife and children still clinging to me.

“I was here last week. I think I noticed this place was closed,” I managed above the shrill, babbling voices of the children.

“We only opened yesterday.”

The clamour of the children was suddenly obliterated by a tremendous bang accompanied by a ballooning burst of steam erupting from the kitchen causing all the adults in the room to duck and the children to scream in unison.

Vuong was the first to react. While I was at the point of cradling the children and diving for cover beneath an adjoining table, he rushed through the cloud of steam into the kitchen releasing a battery of oaths in a mix of English, French and Vietnamese.

A few seconds later, Mai and I found him standing in the middle of the kitchen which was awash with steaming water and scraps of food debris.

“My fault! My fault!” he was saying. “I knew there was something wrong with that old pressure cooker. Why did I use a pressure cooker to soften the beef? I haven’t done that in years.”

By then, the kids were all huddled whimpering at the far end of the room and the few diners who had been present were standing on the footpath outside peering in through the open front door.

Mai moved to assure those outside that it was safe to return to their seats. While Vuong began to clean up with a mop and bucket, shooing me out of the kitchen when I tried to assist, I moved to where the children were huddled and tried as best as I could to assure them that all was well again and there would be no more loud noises.

Vuong was struggling to maintain his composure. “You saved our children.”

Along with him and Mai, I was sitting at one of their tables drinking tea. By then, they had closed the restaurant to allow the kitchen to dry out. The children had recovered from their fright and had been sent reluctantly to their room.

“I didn’t save your children. I did nothing.”

“If you hadn’t walked in when you did, they would have been still sitting on the kitchen floor playing when the lid blew off the pressure cooker. They would all have been badly scalded. Or worse.” He wiped away a tear that was threatening to spill from one of his eyes, causing Mai to place a hand on his arm. “One of them could have been hit by the lid.”

Mai, lifted her hand from her husband’s arm and placed it over one of my hands. “You’re our good luck charm, Johnny.”

I must declare that I was simmering in a sense of contented relief. Having earlier had my confidence in my coincidence ability dented by the reaction of my colleagues to my

declaration about it, what had happened after I entered the restaurant had me believing my doubts may have been premature. Of course, I knew that I had not deliberately triggered having the children scurry out of the kitchen a few moments before the cooker exploded, but I did believe that my regularly attracting coincidences may have played a part.

After we discussed for a while what we all had been doing since we last saw one another, I raised the subject I wanted to discuss with them.

“Recent people smuggling,” Mai glanced at Vuong. “Who do you think? Bian, maybe.”

“Bian definitely. But whether she would want to discuss it is another matter.”

“What are you going to do with what you learn, Johnny? Write about it?”

“No, not simply write about it. I’m going to try to destroy that part of the people smuggling industry that is controlled by a man called Mehmet Dogan,” surprising myself with the degree of confidence implied in the way I announced the scope of my intention.

They too seemed surprised and sat staring at me in silence for a few moments before Vuong responded with, “Definitely Bian then. She would want to help as much as possible.”

He glanced at his watch. “She lives about 30 minutes away. If you can spare a couple of hours, I can take you now.”

Shortly afterwards, we were climbing through the Gold Coast hinterland, a verdant landscape so different from the concrete and glass buildings that towered along the waterfront behind us like a stark, denuded forest of giant, limbless trees, we could have readily believed we had stepped onto a different planet. Open, grass-carpeted fields, upon which grazing cattle were scattered, were divided here and there by patches of lush rainforest. Neat houses, encased by broad, open verandas sat at the end of lanes long enough to protect the occupants from the noise of an occasional passing truck on the road upon which we were travelling.

Eventually, Vuong steered off the bitumen onto a narrow, winding road that led to higher country. “We’ve visited here from time to time over the years. But this is the first time since we moved to Surfers about a month ago. She may be a bit annoyed about that.”

Now that we were nearing our destination, he explained a little about why Bian Diep might be of help to me. He then related a sad tale that was probably too common among those countries that had been disadvantaged by wars or religious or ideological intolerance.

Bian parents had been professional people – her father a doctor, her mother a university lecturer – who had lost their jobs and made destitute when the Communists took over. Her parents were long before deceased, and her husband had died of cancer several years before, leaving her with two sons and two daughters. Her eldest son, Chien had been drowned when an overcrowded people smuggling boat was lost with everyone on board somewhere in the Mediterranean. He had been attempting to reach France where her elder daughter Linh had earlier fallen foul of smugglers and had disappeared. Bian and her remaining two children were then harassed by the smuggling organisation involved with the loss of her son and disappearance of her daughter, whom they claimed still owed them close to \$100 thousand American dollars. But, unlike many in her situation, a still-wealthy relative with close connections to the government had fortuitously stepped in to settle their debts and put them on a boat to Australia.

“Did she hear anything more of her elder daughter?”

“Yes, but not something she wanted to hear. The wealthy relative had criminal associates involved in people smuggling who told him, and he relayed to Bian, that Linh had been tricked into working in a brothel at Marseille and apparently had died from numerous beatings and the drugs she had been forced to take. Not that the story could ever be verified. But at least her younger children are safe. They’re both studying medicine at the Australian National University in Canberra after obtaining scholarships helped by Bian who speaks excellent English.”

We began to climb through a steeper stretch of the road. “This cutting wasn’t here when I first visited. It branches off from where the old road used to swing to the right back there behind us and pass close to a steep gorge. Too close in the council’s opinion. So, they blocked off the old road to vehicular traffic allowing only bushwalker access to the top of the gorge.”

As we drove up to Bian’s small, weatherboard cottage, I was surprised to see a road grader was parked to one side of a carport in which I could see a Land Rover that had

four large spotlights mounted on a rack above the windscreen. “She has her own grader?”

“The council lent it to her to do her own upkeep of this end of the road. She has the last property on it, and it suits them for her to keep an eye on it and repair any damage from storms and fallen limbs.”

Whether Bian was annoyed at Vuong’s tardiness in catching up with her, or in his bringing a stranger into the sanctuary she had built around herself here in a modest little cottage hidden away partly surrounded by a towering rainforest, until he mentioned my intention of targeting people smuggling, did she pay me any attention at all.

She was a slim, middle-aged woman, who had given me no more than a cursory uninterested glance when he introduced me. But when he mentioned why I was there, a sparkle came into her eyes as she observed me with an intensity that obliterated the tired, world-weary dullness that had formally been reflected in her general demeanour. Now, her chin rose, and her shoulders straightened as her former, high-cheeked beauty emerged. I could easily imagine her wearing a conical hat and a flowing Ao Dai gown while perched side-saddle behind a young man propelling her through Saigon on a motor scooter to the admiring observation of those watching the passing parade, Paris-style, from the cafés flanking the street.

She had been sitting in an easy chair in the lounge room where she had directed us when we arrived. Now, she rose and stood watching me intently for some time before speaking. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

A short time later, when the three of us were armed with steaming cups of tea, I asked her which people smuggling group had caused her so much harm.

Her lips drew back from her teeth as she practically hissed, “They’re called the *The Purple and Gold Adventure Holidays Corporation*.”

I could have been surprised, but coincidences were becoming a bit more blasé for me on that day.

“They’re the ones I intend to attack. After I ran afoul of one of their leaders in Surfers a fortnight ago.”

Her eyes intensified. “Dogan?”

“Yes, Dogan.”

Her face crumpled and she suddenly burst into tears. Rising quickly from her chair, she rushed out of the room leaving us staring at each other with expressions reflecting

our uncertainty of whether to follow her or remain where we were. A few moments later we could clearly hear her retching in what I assumed was a bathroom.

I was at the point of rising to enquire if there was anything we could do to assist, when she reappeared ashen faced, and assured us she was alright, but needed a moment to recover her breath.

I rose and headed for the kitchen. “I’ll bring you a glass of water.”

When I returned and placed the water before her, she sipped a little before placing the glass back on the table and staring at it. “So, it’s true what my enquiries revealed? He is living here on the Gold Coast?”

“Your enquiries? I would have thought you would want to blot from your memory anything about him and his evil organisation.”

She glanced at Vuong. “You told him what happened to my son and daughter?”

He nodded, perhaps a little shame-faced for not having first sought her permission, particularly about what happened to her daughter.

The gleam was back in her eyes as she lifted her head and returned her attention to me. “Why would I not enquire about his whereabouts, when one day I intend to kill him?”

That startled us. Before we could respond, she asked how did I plan to attack The Purple and Gold organisation?

Other than locating his servers I wasn’t sure what Ruth and Ant would come up with. So , to change the subject, I asked her if the debts the smugglers had forced on the families of those who had been smuggled had been transacted by a local bank in Vietnam; my question – as directed by Ruth – being the prime purpose of my visit.

“No, there was no way they would have risked involving a local bank. After the war, local banks were often here one day, gone the next, as those who ran them were having trouble replacing the old French model of financial control of the economy. The loans were transacted and controlled offshore by a large international banking group.” She lowered her voice as she told us its name.

Having obtained the information I had sought and being keen to find out if Ant and Spider had had any luck in identifying a probable site for Dogan’s servers, I was pleased when Bian swallowed a yawn behind a cupped hand, about which she apologised, explaining that she usually indulged herself with an afternoon nap about that time.

“And I was out late last night in the Rover looking for a fox that has been prowling around my chicken coop.

“Did you see it?”

“No. The pesky devil is the last one left of a family of four.” Adding with a wry smile, “And all the smarter knowing what happened to the others.”

We took our leave shortly afterwards with some feelings of recrimination for suddenly abandoning her. Vuong, who was keen to get back to his kitchen, went as far as assuaging any guilt about our sudden departure by promising that he and Mai would visit her on the following Sunday. As we walked out, I noticed a double barrel 12-gauge shotgun and a hunting rifle fitted with a telescopic sight leaning against the junction of the hallway and an adjoining room.

“It was smart of him using a big bank with an exemplary international reputation. He’d have less worry then about the nature of the loans he’s organised for the families of those he’s smuggled attracting too much scrutiny by any authority checking for underhand pressure on the borrowers to commit themselves to taking out exorbitant loans they would struggle to repay by normal means.”

Vuong grimaced. “*Homo homoni lupus est*. Man is a wolf to man.”

“Well, man or wolf. It would be smart of Dogan to stay well away from that little lady. I’m sure she meant it when she said that one day she intends to kill him.”

He sighed deeply. “I hope that she doesn’t do anything stupid. She’s had enough trouble in her life already without inviting more.”

Seven

I met up with Ant to discover that he and Spider had identified three likely contenders for the site of the servers: all of them large, free-standing banks with probably plenty of spare room in their basements. Other banks and insurance agencies they had looked at, were in shopping centres and quickly dismissed for being too small. Cyber snooping by Ant of the IT managers employed at the three banks, had then reduced their number to one very likely contender.

We called him 'Wally'.

Ant was to discover that Wally owned a four-bedroom apartment with an estimated value well in excess of \$5 million in a high-rise block directly opposite the beach. And, although he drove to and from work each day in a small nondescript Japanese car, he kept a Ford Mustang in the building's car park. The bank where he was in charge of IT predated car parks being built beneath buildings on the Gold Coast. So, Ant was able to identify Wally by the numberplate of his car and take note of his appearance when he left work at the close of business. With his phone switched to *Speaker* so that I could listen, Ant relayed description of his appearance to Spider, whom he had directed to scout the area around Wally's apartment block, seeking as much information about him as they could gather to confirm he was indeed in Dogan's employ.

Spider expressed some irritation in his tone when he replied. "You say he is tall, blond, a bit thickset and looks like a surfer. So do half the people I can see around here."

"I heard him tell one of the others as they left the bank that he intends to go for a swim. So, he'll be carrying a towel."

"Everyone is carrying a towel. Or has one wrapped around the waist."

Nevertheless, soon afterwards, he reported that he had identified Wally as he emerged from the lobby of the apartment block. But that he hadn't gone for a swim. Upon receiving what Spider described as a friendly wave from one of two young women sitting at a café opposite the beach, Wally joined them and ordered a coffee for himself.

Spider also ordered a coffee and drew up a chair close enough to their table to catch bits of their conversation. From what he could gather, the women had arrived the day

before from Sydney and, upon making their acquaintance, Wally had promised to take them out on the town later that evening.

“He’s booked a table for three people at a top restaurant at Broadbeach for 7 o’clock this evening,” Spider relayed to us after Wally and the women went their separate ways to prepare for the night out.

I asked him to send me the name and phone number of the restaurant. “Ruth could do with a good slap-up dinner. If she agrees, I’ll book a table for four where we can observe Wally’s ways and perhaps get further confirmation that he is indeed whom we think he is.”

Ruth did agree and, shortly after 7 o’clock, we were able to observe Wally in full expansive mood at a nearby table.

After he assured the women of the appetizing benefit of launching their evening with Champagne spiked with a nip of peach liquor, they launched into their meal with a generous mix of oysters Kilpatrick and Tasmanian scallops, both dishes served in their shells and washed down with lavish helpings from what was left in the bottle of Champagne after Wally had used it to top up their drinks before ordering another.

“Vintage Bollinger,” whispered Ruth, “I think we have our man.”

We also started our meal with the mix of shellfish, and then shared a duck confit, which was so delicious and attracted so many approving murmurings, we hardly noticed the enthusiasm with which Wally and his companions were tackling their five spiced lobster, which they also washed down with lavish helpings of Champagne.

After the duck we were comfortably sated and were content with ordering coffee, whereas Wally and his companions were hoeing into a dish each of golden crusted Crème Brûlée.

When we heard Wally then voice an intention to introduce his companions to the nearby Star Casino, Ruth, Ant and even Spider, all cried “Enough!” and unanimously elected me to accompany Wally and the women to the casino while they headed for bed. In their defence, by then we had shared two bottles of Champagne.

“Pikers!” I admonished when they dropped me off from our taxi outside the place I had previously known as ‘*Jupiters*’. Closer to the Casino’s entrance I was pleased to see that Wally and his companions were also alighting from a taxi. At least he wasn’t so stupid as to show off his Mustang on their boozy night out.

He and his companions played roulette for a while with Wally generously doubling the chips the women placed. From my vantage, I estimated that they broke about even

before moving to a blackjack table. *Sensible*, I told myself, picking the only casino game where, if it's played using the well-tryed 'blackjack basic strategy' players had a better chance of winning than playing any of the Casino's other games, because the strategy limited the advantage the House had with those other games. In short, depending on the first two cards the player and the dealer have in front of them, the basic strategy locks a player into following rigid rules of when to be content with their cards, when to ask for another, and when to double their bet. The object of the game is to have their cards total as close to 21 as sensible without 'busting', exceeding 21.

Wally soon proved he had no knowledge of the basic strategy or chose to ignore it by making what he probably thought his companions would believe was courageous play; for instance, asking for another card when he already had a strong position over the dealer and should have been content with the cards he already had.

Most regular blackjack players know and play the basic strategy So, as soon as the other players at the table realised that Wally either didn't know the strategy or was choosing to play in cavalier faction, they moved to another table not wanting to receive cards they would not have received had he not been there. Superstitious perhaps, but gamblers are often superstitious. Three times this occurred before Wally's time at the table was terminated after a nasty confrontation he had with an elderly lady sitting beside him on his left, causing the pit boss asking him to leave for the sake of peace.

Wally had been sitting on two cards totalling 19 points and stupidly called for another card, causing the dealer's eyes to almost pop from her head, the pit boss's jaw to drop close to his chest and the elderly lady sitting next to him to swallow an anatomical expletive.

The card he was then dealt was a 5, which caused him to *bust*, but which would have given the elderly lady an unbeatable 21 points.

When she was dealt instead a 10 that caused her to *bust*, she stared at it as she may have stared at a cobra on the cusp of striking at her.

As the dealer then collected her chips, she stood up and, turning to Wally observed him for several seconds with a glare that could have stripped paint. She then said loudly and clearly enough for the patrons at several nearby tables to hear, that she had never before encountered anyone who was so pig-ignorant of how to play blackjack that they would even contemplate asking for another card when they were already sitting on cards totalling 19. And that, if he ever again attempted to sit at a table where she was already sitting, she would rise and, after asking him to stand up, knee him in the crotch with as

much force as she could muster and leave him writhing in agony at her feet before she called for security who, upon hearing why she had treated him in this manner, would undoubtedly relish the opportunity of throwing him out into the street.

I didn't wait to see how Wally's female companions reacted to this. Their eyes rolling skyward at some of his previous play suggested they would be less than impressed. Whether they were or not, I didn't know or care. By then, I was beating a hasty retreat away from the table to conceal from Wally and his companions the choking laughter fit that gripped me upon hearing the old lady's outburst.

I blame what then occurred on my having consumed far more alcohol than I would have normally consumed in an evening mainly because of being handed a free glass of Champagne whenever my attention was elsewhere by young women in long sequined gowns strolling the room promoting a particular brand of the sparking beverage.

Deciding that I had seen enough of Wally to have gained a thorough understand of his shortcomings, I was heading for the door when I was forced to make my way around a crowd that had gathered in front of the casino's big wheel, a magnificent rotating piece of colourful artwork designed to entice those who would rather place their money on a device where no thought or strategy was required, but simply rely on Dame Fortune to smile on them.

I stopped and watched a couple of spins of the wheel to the accompaniment of a chorus of either "stop, stop, stop" or "go, go, go" from those who saw the number they had bet upon approach the pointer too quickly or too slowly accompanied by the "click, click, click" of the pointer on the pegs that sat on either side of each number.

A quick scan of the wheel revealed to me that the largest odds against winning were 60 to 1, a solitary figure among less generous odds that were repeated regularly around the wheel and thereby more likely to remain beneath the pointer when the wheel stopped moving, odds of less than 10 to 1 being regularly repeated.

Earlier, I had contemplated playing a few hands of blackjack, but reasoned that, although I would find regularly beating the dealer entertaining, even if I stayed up all night, my measly \$5 and \$10 bets would realise less than what the cleaners were probably paid during the same period. So, I had kept in my wallet, the \$100 note I had toyed with converting to chips.

Now, as I stood before this beautiful wheel, a device upon which I had never before been even tempted to chance my luck, a rush of blood or, more likely, stupidity gripped me, and I thought, "What the hell!"

So, almost as if my actions were no longer in my complete control because of my alcohol-induced euphoric mood, I converted my note to a single \$100 chip and placed it on the 60 to 1 slot.

This was met with cries of disbelief or incredulity or perhaps even admiration by those standing close enough to see what I had done.

The croupier called for last bets, gave me a wan smile, likely signifying commiserations, and spun the wheel.

At first, the clicking came at a rapid pace. “click-click-click-click-click-click.”

Then the clicks gradually slowed down, “click, click, click, click.”

I, and most of those who had seen my bet watched as the 60 to 1 slot moved agonisingly closer to the pointer. “click ... click ... click.”

And then the wheel had almost stopped, and the pointer was hovering on top of the peg that sat between the 60 to 1 slot and an adjacent 5 to 1 slot.

“Wallabadah!” I shouted as loudly as I could manage, releasing the breath I had held in check for the previous three clicks of the pointer.

The wheel shook to a complete standstill and the pointer fell back into the middle of the 60 to 1 slot.

The crowd around me erupted with a mighty roar that completely obliterated whatever I then managed to shout with what little breath I had left.

As I walked away, cradling the heap of chips the croupier piled into a container for me, the crowd clapped their hands in appreciation of being made witness to what they believed were my heroics.

I had seen that happen only once before at a casino in Nice when an accomplished Blackjack player, one who placed much more on his bets than my measly €5 and €10 ones, walked away from the table with several thousand euros worth of chips.

The cashier gave me a tight smile as I piled the chips in front of her and began to count them while stacking them neatly. “Cash or a cheque?”

“Cash please,” I mumbled and watched her counting out \$100 and \$50 bills while snapping a rubber band around every ten notes.

“Six grand!” I mumbled as I reached the door, still not fully believing what had just happened, my thoughts interrupted by a shout back at the big wheel of, “Wallabadah!” followed almost immediately by a groan and an elongated, “Fuuuuuuck!”

“It’s probably in the intonation,” I offered the doorman who had turned away from me to look back into the casino as I stepped into the night. “Or perhaps you had to have lived there as a kid.”
