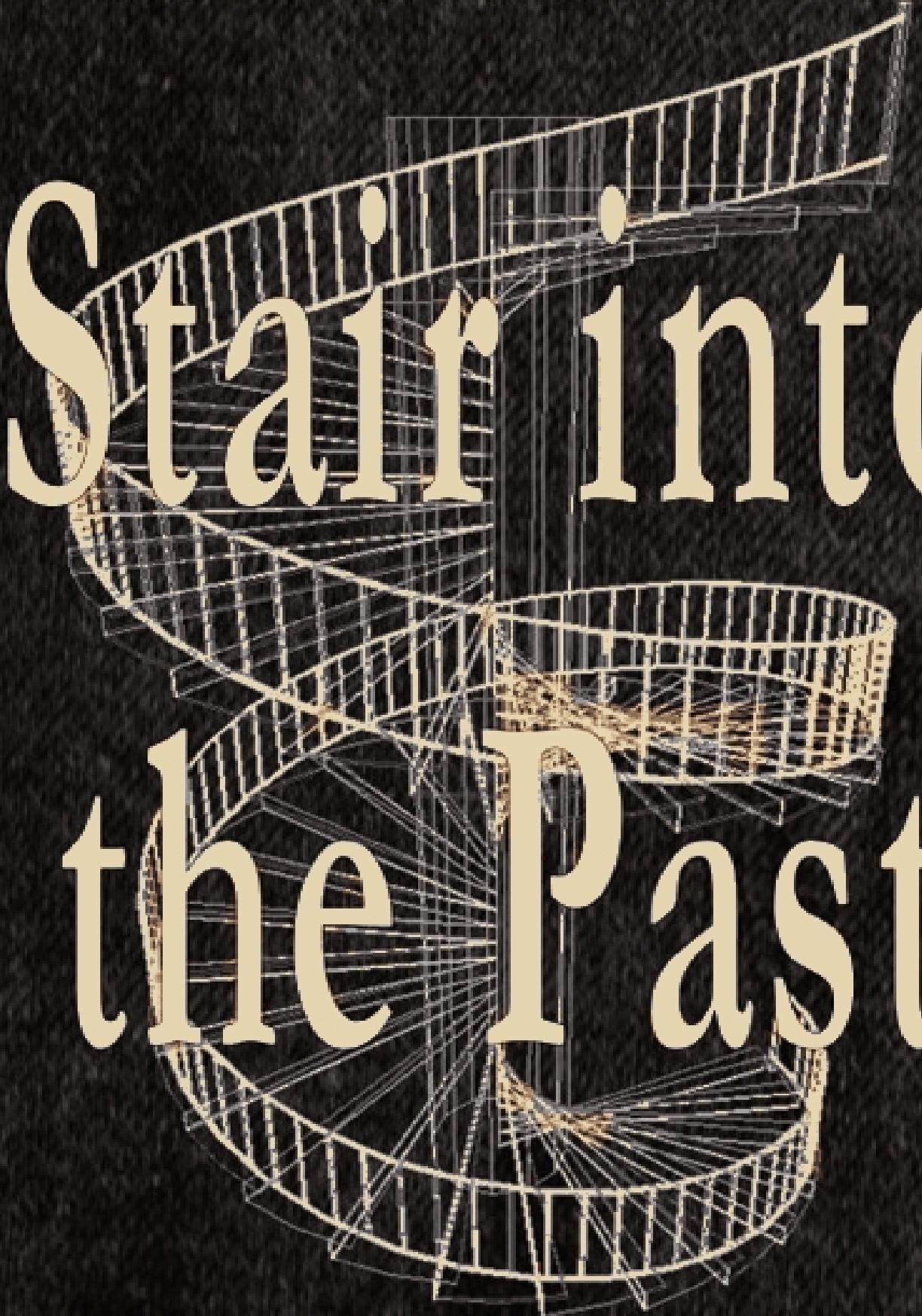


Ian Jackson

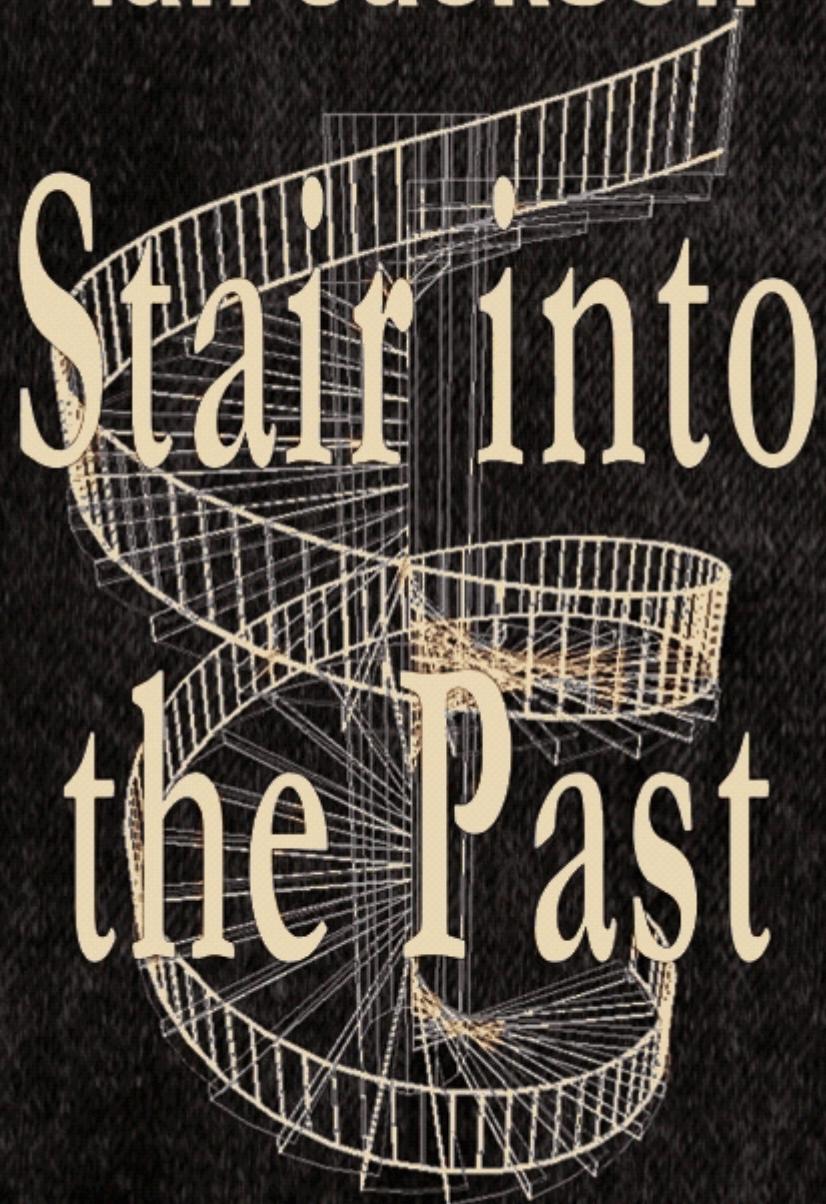
Stair into
the Past



An Alex Kingbridge Adventure

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By Ian Jackson

Synopsis

At 30, Alex Kingbridge never new his parents. He spent his normal day doing electrical work on farm machinery. When he finds that his father had left money to himself and a vague list of people across Australia, he is engaged by a law firm to track them down. The clues that link them all come from a string of unique spiral wooden staircases that his father had built in different towns from thirty years before. Find the missing staircase and he has a chance to find the missing person.

Alex goes on an adventure that traverses Australia and New Zealand and meets a lot of interesting people along the way. Only with his special methods of problem solving and a little luck can he complete his mission.

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**All persons, businesses, buildings and broken equipment
that appear in this story are fictional.**

**If you happen to share a name with any of the characters
that appear in this story, then its just a sad coincidence and
I apologise in advance.**

Chapter 1

On the southern coast of the Australian continent lies the creeping capital of Melbourne. Its suburbs reach out like spread fingers that claw increasingly at the surrounding countryside. One of these strands probe a band of low hills, densely carpeted with tall eucalypts and ratty wattle. Open farmland infringes and sometimes penetrates this forest with long bands of pasture dotted with the occasional cluster of buildings, each with its own function. One such group consisted of a decrepit weatherboard house next to an equally neglected workers hut, both spotty with patches of white paint still clinging to their sides. An adjacent hay barn and machine shed clad in rusting iron had fared no better. Permanently open doors of the machine shed revealed a massive tractor attached to a six-wheeled forage wagon, its yellow patina faded and scarred from years of crop collection.

Alex Kingbridge swung the access hatch near the front of the wagon until it was flush with its long sides, then closed the lid on his notebook computer. For the past hour it had been used to access the controls that managed the machine. A series of tests and adjustments had been necessary. He hauled on a thick hydraulic drive lever high up on the side of the wagon. From deep within a long rumble bellowed as the chain driven spreader jerked into motion down the length of its floor. It ran for several seconds then Alex returned the lever to 'off' so that he could speak without having to yell. With a sharp nod, he turned to the farmer standing next to him with crossed arms. "Well Trevor...it goes, but you've got to be careful not to let the grass build up on the door interlock. It'll tear the wires off and screw up at the start of every season". Alex unplugged several serial patch cables and began to collect his scattered tools.

The farmer rubbed the back of his hand against a rough half-beard on his chin. It grew not as an act of style, but from the simple result of not-shaving. "S'fine Alex, I'm stoked. Thanks for callin by so quick. We'll be spreadin with this one tomorrow." He looked worried. "Do up the bill now, but I gotta tell you I can't be payin for a couple o' weeks."

Alex sighed and snipped the lid on his steel toolbox. He knew he'd get paid eventually, but anything he could have earned today would have been helpful. His landlord back in town was not interested in the particulars of seasonal work. With tools secured in the broad rear of his aging Ford utility, he set off down the twin ruts of the long driveway that paralleled a thin river. His home was still a good thirty five minutes away.

The road back to town followed the river valley downstream for some distance. As the valley narrowed there remained only soft soil either side of the river before surrounding hills rose high on both sides. Accordingly the road ascended some distance above the valley floor and hugged the side of the mountain to become a narrow, winding corridor cut hard into the rock. The road was sealed, with sufficient space for two vehicles to pass, but very little else. Alex drove slowly with his window wound down and revelled in the conclusion of another long day. He'd travelled this way many times and always enjoyed glimpses of broad valley views while firmly working the steering wheel.

The highest point of the road was still ahead and out of sight when he was startled by a wide flash of shadow from a small single-engine aircraft that passed just a few metres overhead at a place where no aircraft should be. There was no sound to accompany this astonishing intrusion and before it drifted around the next steep ridge Alex observed that its propeller wasn't turning and it was

loosing height fast. An icy chill gripped his spine and he accelerated somewhat in its path. As he drove, he speculated that the aircraft must have experienced an engine failure somewhere in the hills behind him. It would then make sense to glide through the valley gap in order to reach the farmlands beyond where a rough landing could be possible. This wasn't going to happen. The tough winds that lived in the valley were strong and chaotic as they forced their way through the mountain narrows. Over his own engine noise he heard a loud scree and crump ahead.

On the peak of the next bend white scraps of aircraft began littering the road and a mangled shape could be seen hugging the roadside barrier. The winds had slammed the poor craft into the hillside just above the road, where it had dropped and cartwheeled horribly. It was already at rest with one wing missing, the remainder of the craft inverted and hanging over a very long drop. One landing wheel was thrust in the air and the other hooked over the barrier. The road around the wreck was dark with some spilled fuel and more could be seen dripping steadily from the remaining wing to the unseen valley floor far below. The carnage took up about a third of the road and there was little room to manoeuvre.

Alex slowed and eased his heavy Ute between the wreck and the hillside, his front wheel riding sharply up the wall of the cutting until the car was balancing largely on diagonal tyres with his driver side rear wheel about half a metre in the air and his door pressed against the rock face. He slid across the bench seat to the passenger door and dropped to the road. There was a muffled movement and an angry voice of someone inside struggling to release themselves from a mostly inverted position, but the situation was very dodgy. If the occupant managed to get their door open, they would simply drop out of sight. The entire craft was only just hanging there by virtue of

a single landing wheel hooked on the steel Armco barrier at the edge of the road.

He yelled several times. "Don't move. Stay where you are" and the sounds from the interior subsided. There were other issues to deal with. The lower fuselage had taken a major crunch, with a partially shattered battery box now hanging out by its cables. The steady drip from it would be battery acid, but it was probably very much alive and a potential ignition source.

He yelled again. "Hang on, I'm going to secure you." Alex ran to his car and tore back the rear cover. There was some rope, but most of this was thin and only suitable for tying light loads. Useless. He spied a coil of winch cable, still wrapped in blue tape from the wholesaler. It was scheduled to be fitted to a pivot irrigator the following week, but now it was just a raw cable with no cable clamps, or hooks on the ends. He grabbed the coil, and from an open toolbox, a pair of secateurs. He knew these cutters wouldn't cut the winch cable, but that wasn't why he took them. Rushing back to the stricken craft, Alex dropped the cable and reached over the barrier to the hanging battery. With dripping fuel everywhere, this was the first priority. His secateurs bit into a copper battery cable and it dropped to hang from the remaining cable. After the second cut, the battery simply disappeared from view. He didn't hear it land.

Returning to the cable roll, he used his cutters again to slice the package tape, then cast half the roll down the road to separate untidily under its own weight. Near one end he formed two large loops, one on another, then dropped them over the landing wheel that extended just above head height, forming a fast clove-hitch on the strut. He looked back to the car. Just tying the cable to the car and backing down the hill wasn't going to work. It would simply drag the whole mess along the road barrier. He spied his rear wheel still floating in the air and made a decision, then wondered if a different

part of his mind hadn't already figured out what had to be done even as he arrived at the scene.

He cast the other raw end of the cable under the car and crawled around the face of the cutting to meet it. This was quickly threaded through a gap in the universal coupling at the vehicle differential. All the slack cable he could reach was pulled through this irregular hole and dumped to the road.

To the pilot he yelled a warning. "Hang onto something, I'm going to try to pull the plane back onto the road."

Alex returned to the passenger door, slid to the driver position and started the engine. In first gear, the vehicle didn't move but he could hear the hanging wheel starting to spin in the air and was thankful for the first time that his old car didn't come with a limited slip diff, which would have seen both wheels turning in unison. The cable quickly wound and bunched around the universal coupling under the car, but it was doing the job. Using careful clutch and accelerator control the cable tightened and hauled on the wreckage in a controlled winching action against the dead weight of the heavy car.

The wheel strut rose in a high arc over the road side barrier towards the mountain, then the fuselage followed and crashed to the road, mostly right-side up in the left hand lane, one section of the craft pressed against his car and shattered the passenger side window. Alex returned to the road by scrambling out of his driver side window onto the roof and sliding across the bonnet. The single occupant of the craft, still in his seat, was pressing against the small door under the remains of a wing stub. With both men working on

it, the door broke free of its frame and the pilot poured onto the road.

He stood, unsteadily, some blood oozing from a forehead wound and gingerly held one arm with the other hand in some obvious pain and uttered a simple "Fuck!"

"Well, you've had a shitty day." Without resistance, Alex led the man to a clear spot uphill from the wreckage and sat him on the ground with his back to a white post. He briefly returned to the car to collect a mostly full bottle of water, removed the cap and handed it to the still stunned pilot.

Alex regarded him briefly and saw a large man in his late forties, with a thin beard and heavy brows. The blood had stopped oozing and the redness in his face from some minutes of total inversion was already fading away. Alex attempted to relieve some of the tension and thumbed in the general direction of the wreckage. "Y'know, those things fly better with an engine that works."

Still, holding his arm which was sprained or worse, the pilot snorted a short chuckle. "Yep. Can't argue with you there.... Sorry for not shaking your hand, just now, but I'm Bill and I've had better days." He looked around as if for the first time. "Aren't we going to get clobbered by traffic here?"

The sun was low to the horizon, casting long shadows from trees and roadside posts and the scene took on a surreal orange glow. Alex shook his head. "Nah. The road mostly stops at the end of the valley and it only serves local traffic. At this time of day, it's all over. Probably a dairy truck will do a run in the morning." He added. "Also the mobile phone cover here is shit, so we're still on our own."

While the pilot shakily drank, Alex returned to the open door of the fuselage and looked inside. A small back pack had fallen to the footwell of the passenger seat, otherwise the craft was empty. He retrieved the pack from the wreck then dropped it by the pilots side. "I'm thinking that when we leave here, you won't be coming back, so you'd better hang on to your gear now."

Withdrawing his phone from his pocket Alex captured some still images of the scene, including a wide shot showing the sheer hillside, the road choked with both car and plane wreck and the prone pilot, still with his back to the post, clutching the bottled water.

The dazed pilot looked up at Alex as he returned. "Stay put for a while Bill, and I'll untangle the car from all that cable."

The tailshaft was a mess and had a sizable ball of cable wrapped around it. Alex chocked the front wheel, put the car in neutral and manually unwound the cable by simply turning the wheel that was still perched half a metre in the air.

With the cable free, he rocked the car savagely until it slid off the escarpment and both rear wheels returned to the road. Then with some jockeying and squeal of scratched paint down the passenger side, he was able to work the vehicle past the wreckage to a clear section of bitumen. The passenger door opened readily enough and the broken glass was roughly swept to the ground. The mess on the road would have to be somebody else's problem. Alex gently escorted the pilot to his passenger seat, clicked in his belt and they

drove along the mountain road in his original direction. Looking in the mirror he noted that there was fair visibility to the crash site in this direction, so a car travelling from town would have ample stopping distance.

Bill, turned his head to stare at the wreckage until it was out of sight. "Y'know, the first person that comes up this road is going to take one look and think '*how the fuck did anyone come out of that alive?*'

Alex shook his head. "No. They'd be the second person. I'm pretty sure I was the first one to think that."

"Well, thanks. I recon I'd have been toast if you hadn't done that trick with the cable back there."

Alex shook his head again, but said nothing for a moment. Then asked: "What happened to your engine? Where were you headed?"

He hissed through his teeth in obvious pain and clutched his damaged arm tighter, but still managed to squeeze out an explanation. "I left from a small airstrip on the far side of the range, near Lake Eildon. The plane was for sale and I was taking it for a test run on a wide circuit over the hills before returning to where I started.

I've got another aircraft which I've been flying for some time, but I've been looking for something smaller. This one was going to be a

sort of hobby craft. Both wing tanks showed full when I took off. I ran one tank down to about half and switched to the second, but then the engine started to cut and I quickly returned to the first tank. Fuel in the second tank wasn't reaching the engine. By then I was well over the mountains and began to circle back. It was getting hard to turn because of the weight difference in the wings badly affected banking."

Alex could sense that apart from almost killing himself that Bill was pretty embarrassed to crash a craft under his control. He looked very tired, but probably felt a need to explain himself, even though Alex was a complete stranger.

Bill continued. "I tried to manually cross-pump between tanks, but that wouldn't work either. Then with the remaining tank still showing under one-quarter full, the engine quit. I was above the valley, but still too high to land and without room to circle back, so I made for the gap where I could see flat land ahead."

Alex asked. "Couldn't you still have stuck to the centre of the pass?"

"No, these craft are fine under power, but they make shit gliders. With the weight imbalance and strong crosswind I was literally slammed into the hill above the road. This crate was definitely not as good as they'd said it'd be. Upon reflection, I've decided not to buy it." He laughed weakly at his own joke despite the pain.

Alex smiled too and thought that he liked this man, but seriously had to get his injuries looked at soon. His own knowledge of medicine

started and finished with band aid strips and cold tablets and not for the first time, wished that he knew more about first aid.

They drove in silence for a while and soon approached the outskirts of the small town.

Chapter 2

The town of Cragieford was not a large one. It presented an uphill main drag with a few lesser streets of weatherboard houses on each side. Two balconied hotels flagged each end of the street, separated by a string of struggling specialty shops, with a post office facing a police station somewhere near the centre. Both hotels were simple drinking places. They had official names, but with a stark difference in elevation they had been tagged as *Top Pub* and *Bottom Pub* longer than anyone could remember.

Cragieford didn't have a hospital as such. It had a day clinic which had long since closed for the day and an elective surgery clinic attached to a nursing home. There was no emergency department,

but they did accept the pilot in a waiting area and made him comfortable with pain killers, while an ambulance was called to take him to a base hospital closer to Melbourne.

From the clinic Alex went to the police station, found a single duty officer still on-deck and gave basic details of the incident. Alex has seen this officer around the town, but knew from reputation that he was widely regarded as being dull and self-important. This view was quickly reinforced. Officer Dillon took notes and probed extensively to see if Alex was somehow responsible for the incident. When this failed, he simply grunted, regarded him as passer-by of limited value, and told him to go home so he could call the road and aviation authorities. Growing weary with the whole exercise, Alex was content to accept this direction and departed the building.

His car cruised past the *Bottom Pub* took the first left turn. Scant seconds later, he killed the engine in the driveway of the split house he'd rented half of for almost two years. A scrappy tortoiseshell cat belonging to the uphill neighbour rubbed his legs as he emptied the mailbox of some junk notices and two letters. Scrunching them under one arm, Alex unlatched his front door and dropped heavily into a soft chair centred in a tiny lounge.

At 30, Alex Kingbridge didn't have striking looks or stature. Average height, short fair hair that was always wavy if he let it grow out. His face was wide, with faintly pronounced cheekbones that did not look out of place. Alex would never stand out in a crowd, yet if an observer were to pause for a closer look, they would see a quiet confidence that belied his age.

As a travelling auto-electrician Alex could usually find enough work to get by, but the nomadic life was often hard. He knew when he

didn't make enough in a week then the days that followed were going to be inevitably tough. Most late model cars were taken to dealers in larger towns for service and support. They had little faith in small operators outside of approved dealerships. Still, Cragieford was a country town where the farmers would come to meet and drink in the quiet times. There was always plenty of broken farm equipment needing attention that couldn't be moved far from the land. Local property owners were keen enough to have him visit their farms to put things right. Modern agriculture relied upon complex machines that have much which can go wrong. Dead reckoning of a past generation had been replaced by GPS navigators and load cell devices. A lot of older farmers struggled with this new technology where a small failure of a sensor or water corroded wire could put a large machine out of action at a costly time. Alex had revealed a natural flair that allowed him to get to the bottom of most problems quickly. Peak times were shortly before Christmas harvests where machines that had been dormant for much of the year would be found to have corroded parts and rat-chewed cables that required his attention. Still, he had been working the area for two years now, and for him, that was a lengthy time. For reasons not fully understood, Alex found it difficult to stay in one place for too long and for some weeks now, that part of him which drove his movements had begun to press for change.

Next to a plate of toasted sandwiches, vapour rose from a mug of coffee. At the first sip he contemplated the two new items of mail. One was a bill from a car insurer seeking his annual renewal. Until a few more cheques arrived, this one was going to be a problem. He put it aside. The second letter was a little more curious. A logo on the envelope showed it was from a Melbourne law firm, which of itself was enough to invoke a pang of distrust. Nothing good ever came from a law firm. The vagueness of the letter within did little to dispel these misgivings. Someone called Ms Rathdown from a Trustee Management department wanted a Mr Kingbridge to visit

their office to 'discuss items of a delicate nature which would best be conducted in person'. They asked him to make an appointment with their reception as soon as convenient. It was dated three days earlier. There were no clues in the letter to dispel his sensations of suspicion and curiosity.

Chapter 3

The following morning found Alex sitting quietly on a train with other commuters making their way to the city centre. He detested the pricey inner city tolls and parking fees even more than the clumsy railway ticketing system. Accordingly he had parked the car some distance from the city before reverting to a train. Before leaving, he'd had to deal with his cars shattered passenger window. It was resolved by simply opening the door, wrapping the affected area in a few layers of cling-wrap, then closing it again.

Alex now swayed in a hard plastic seat, a voyeur of inner-suburban back yards. The carriage was well occupied, but not crowded, with relatively few passengers venturing out after the early rush had passed. Some travellers stared vacantly out the opposite windows, but most simply toyed with their phones, tablets and music players.

His thoughts drifted back to the brief phone conversation with the receptionist at the law firm first thing that morning. Yes, Ms Rathdown was keen to make contact and could he visit their office as soon as convenient. No, she did not know about the nature of the request, but was sure that all would be explained upon his arrival. With no pressing appointments of his own, curiosity won out over unease and he arranged for a meeting later that morning.

The feeling of unease continued as Alex arrived at the Collins street address. It was a small, aged building with its scant four levels dwarfed by the glass and concrete towers on each side. A brass plaque above the entrance directed visitors to the reception desk of the law firm *Blomfield & Close* on the first floor.

The woman behind the desk revealed herself by voice as the one he had spoken with earlier that morning, but now he could add tight greying curls and a sour face to complete his mental picture. She whispered almost wordlessly into a phone, activated a false smile and indicated that if he took a seat Ms Rathdown would arrive shortly. He wondered idly at this statement. Would the meeting not happen if he failed to sit down? Alex decided to simply stand where he was to test the theory.

Within a scant minute, hollow steps on polished wooden floors signalled the arrival of a tall woman in her late twenties with a ponytail and a bounce in her step. Only a wad of gum and a red top featuring a large letter would have been needed to complete a cheerleader image, but this impression fled when she offered her hand in formal introduction.

"Good morning Mister Kingbridge, I'm Tessa Rathdown. Thank you for coming in. I'm sure you have questions. Please come this way." She looked directly at Alex with a smile that showed she had the full focus of her full attention on him. She chattered easily as they wound their way past small wood-grained offices, yellow with incandescent lighting. Here and there pillars of ribbon tied documents rose from the floor like cave formations. "This is a very old business that so far has resisted a movement to modern corporate headquarters. We've served three generations of clients who like us this way, so this is how we stay." Alex suspected that this

was a set phrase given to new visitors as the firm's rationale for resisting change. Still, the building did have a certain presence that was usually absent from modern buildings he had been in.

They arrived at a modest, windowless office with a desk and a pair of visitor chairs. This room was also cluttered, but the desk was mostly clear and small details did invoke some sense of organisation. The young woman settled into a high-backed seat on the far side of the desk and Alex lowered himself into one of the remaining chairs. He noticed a partially folded morning newspaper on the end of the desk, the cover showing an image of a wrecked plan on a narrow road as seen from the air. Someone must have moved fast to get this, and wondered if his name had been left out of the article and said nothing.

"First, I'm obliged to confirm that I'm talking to the right person. Have you got any I.D.?" Wordlessly, Alex slid his driver license from his wallet. She glanced at it briefly, nodded and handed it back.

"I don't mind saying that we had difficulty finding you." She paused, as though she was preparing for a fresh approach. "Please, Mister Kingbridge, what do you know about your parents?"

The question surprised him by its directness. It was not in his nature to volunteer personal information. Circumstances were unusual. He decided that there was little to be lost from a guarded reply.

"I know almost nothing about my real parents, I understand that my mother died when I was very young but I don't usually talk about it."

He let the sentence hang there and smiled, as if to say *it's your turn...*

"Fair enough. You don't know why we invited you here yet. I'll tell you straight up that you're not in any trouble. You're not being chased for money and I'm not going to ask you to do anything that you don't want to do. Certainly, anything we discuss here will be regarded as confidential. I have a brief record that says you were raised in foster care and eventually adopted, but there are gaps in what we were able to find. "

"Ok then. I was raised by an elderly couple, or at least I thought they were at the time. I knew them as Aunt Mavis and Uncle Stan. They were careful to tell me that they were not my real folks. Uncle Stan had been an electrical fitter in the army. He got me interested in wires and how things work. When he passed away, I continued to live with Aunt Mavis until she sold up and moved to a nursing home. She survived another three years. It took all of her assets to fund that move and it left me without a place to live."

"What happened then?"

He shrugged. "I rented a room, finished an apprenticeship as an auto electrician with a Ford dealership. When they went bust I went out on my own and I've been moving about ever since." Alex was disinclined to elaborate further.

The girl leaned forward in her seat, lifted a folder to the desktop and began to unwind a figure-8 of ribbon that bound it together. "Mister Kingbridge. there is a bit more to your ancestry than you know."

"Please, I'm Alex. I don't like 'Mister'. It makes me want to see if there is someone else standing behind me."

"Sure Alex." She began to slide some documents from the folder. "I prefer 'Tessa' too, but they're pretty old fashioned in here when it comes to introductions." She studied the document before her.

"Your mother was April Kingbridge. Born and raised in Maryborough, Victoria. She never married and you took her name. She died when you were only two in a bad vehicle collision."

A newspaper clipping was slid across the table. Basic facts described the incident and an indistinct black & white picture of twisted metal showed what was once a car.

It meant little to Alex. Certainly it was tragic, but he had no memories of such things, the article could have been about anyone.

"There's more. A lot more. The real reason for our meeting is about your father." She slid another document to him. It had a single name on it. Benjamin Caslow.

Alex leaned back in his chair and eyed his host. "Why are you telling me this? No offence please, but you don't look like you're one of the partners in this outfit. I don't know why I'm here."

She appeared to ignore the question. "I'm sorry to have to tell you, but your father is also dead. This happened fifteen years ago. He came into some money. Quite a lot really. He made arrangements for

investments and a rather complicated trust fund to be administered by this firm. It was set up by one of the senior partners who didn't do much with it after the investments were primed. As a junior assistant I did a lot of legwork on his cases. Six months ago he retired, which meant that all of his clients were divided up between the main partners here. The leftover small and inactive cases were given to me to handle. Your fathers trust was one of them. I read it, convinced the partners to activate your father's case and this has eventually led me to find you."

"Okay. You've given me a bit to think about, but there's plenty you haven't said. You spoke of a Trust. Where do I fit in?"

"Sure, but first I need to tell you more about your father. There is a lot here you can read at leisure, but I can give you an outline now. It seems he was a rather special craftsman in his time. He was a master carpenter who specialised in only one job. He built spiral staircases from wood. He would follow a project to a town where a special staircase had to be fitted on-site. These were difficult custom jobs apparently, taking four to five months to complete each project. The way I read this file, he also enjoyed associating with the local girls. With each town he would make a new 'friend', but when the job finished he moved on, always on his own. I think we can say that he left a string of broken relationships across the country over many years." Tessa lifted her gaze from the file thoughtfully for a moment. "I don't know if that makes him a hopeless romantic, or an asshole but its history now and we can't change it."

Having nothing to add to this revelation, Alex simply shrugged.

"His story took a fresh twist about 15 years ago. You sometimes hear about it, but not to people you know. He won a lottery. A big one. A bit over seven million dollars. I'm reading between the lines here, but it seems that he didn't need or particularly want this money. He was a heavy smoker, apparently dying from lung cancer at this time and it wasn't going to make him better. That's when he came to our law firm, established a trust to invest the money with a view to helping the women he had left behind. Perhaps it was just a big guilt thing, or without a known family to leave it to, this plan was the next best outcome. That part was never achieved I'm sorry to say. Loosely, his plan was to give a large sum to any of the women in his past and the same again to any children that came from those relationships."

"My predecessor was unfortunately a man of little imagination. He established the necessary investments, but apparently your father died before supplying proper details of his beneficiaries. It all looked a bit too hard I'm afraid and the case was shelved while my boss moved on to more pressing work."

"When the case was passed on to me, it had been cold for a long time. Our firm had not fulfilled its obligations and I decided to do something about it."

Alex's stomach clenched. He was hearing the story and it made some sense, but he had a hard time trying to tie the information to his own reality. "From what you say he'd spent his life wondering from place to place. How could you possibly work out where he'd been and who he had met? How did you find *me*?"

Tessa replied by sliding two more items across the desk. A crumpled, but flattened handwritten letter and another yellowed newspaper clipping. It was a typical half-page from a provincial paper that struggled for interesting headlines. One picture of an old crone in a chair was captioned '*Beryl makes 100*'. Another described a new dog washing enterprise. The important item showed an image of a man leaning over the side, a little way up a large spiral staircase. An ornate hand rail rode the top of turned columns, one for each tread. It was a thing of beauty, even in black and white. The heading glibly announced '*Mayor takes new staircase for a spin*'. The text at the top of the page identified the paper as the *Maryborough Chronicle*. Its date was from thirty one years ago.

Alex put the clipping down and shifted his attention to the letter. It was handwritten in neat script and told a different story.

I realise that I am dying, but I have led a life rich with love and material accomplishment. The women I have known always knew that I would move on and not return, yet that did not diminish our desire for love and happiness while it lasted. Every stair I made is a triumph and a monument to my feelings at that time. Every woman who shared my triumph has been immortalised in the first step. Undoubtedly they have moved on and had families of their own, but should they climb that stair, they shall remember me.

It is my desire that my windfall shall be shared to them and to any children that we shared to the sum of a million dollars to each. With prudent investment this should be achievable within a short time of my passing.

Benjamin Caslow

He turned the letter over. In the same script was a simple list of town names. At the top of the list was 'Maryborough'.

Tessa gave him a moment to read. "Quite flowery and very self-serving. As a legal set of instructions it leaves much to be desired. Unfortunately, he never followed it up with more detailed instruction, or names of beneficiaries. This leaves it up to our firm as executors to locate these beneficiaries and fulfil his wishes."

Alex passed the letter back. "What did he mean by the words '*immortalised in the first step*' ?

"Take another look at that newspaper picture." She passed a magnifying glass to him "Have a closer look at the bottom of the stair."

In faint greyscale the centre of the bottom tread revealed an ornately carved word. It said '*April*'.

"Alex, that was your mother. I made some enquiries. This stair was for council offices in Maryborough thirty years ago. Now the old offices are used as an archive and the council meets in a newer building. Back then, your mother, *April Kingbridge* worked there as a typist."

Alex fingered the picture thoughtfully. Tessa continued.

"From her I followed a difficult trail that led me to you, but this type of investigation is not my usual thing. We have little information to work with. We have his list of towns where he did project work over a 15 year period, but it contains no names or addresses.

Your father's Trust fund has grown admirably since his death and you are entitled to a share of it, but now we get to the important part. We also need your help. We want you to track down the women he dedicated the trust to and help us finalise his bequests. There could be children involved. That would make them your half-brothers or sisters. I need your help to trace them and confirm if they really are related to you. Then we can begin to dispense funds from the Trust. At present most of the funds are tied up and it takes time to extract their value, but we know you are entitled to the first million. If you can work for us in locating more of his 'friends', I have been authorised by the Partners to credit you a further four-hundred thousand bonus with each success."

She pulled one more document from the folder. It was a bank cheque made out to Alexander Kingbridge for \$50,000. "I am also authorised to give this to you now if you can help us. More will follow. Can you do this Alex?"

The cheque was just a bit of paper with numbers on it. It seemed absurd. How could such a small thing change his life? "Why do you want me for this job. I'm not an investigator, I'm an auto electrician.' The stakes here are high. Wouldn't a professional investigator be able to do this better?"

She shook her head. "No, we've had discussions about this. You're the oldest surviving descendent of Benjamin Caslow. You have a strong vested interest and the beneficiaries when found will be much more likely to respond to someone with a personal connection to your father. You have the additional incentive to locate missing branches of your own family. We believe you have what it takes to do the job."

Alex glanced at his wristwatch and raised an excuse to stall for some thinking time. "Look, it's almost midday. I saw a coffee shop a few doors up when I came in. Let's find a snack there before getting into more details."

Tessa agreed. "Sure, I know the place. I go there often." It suited her too. It was a complex case to get the message across. Bringing discussions to a conversational level away from the office would help.

Retracing their path through the building, they endured a fresh sour look from the receptionist and stepped onto the busy street. A lot of city noise accosted the two after the relative serenity of the office. In front of them, trams passed each other with the traditional double-ding in salutation. A few short steps brought them to the front of *Café Appaloosa*, a light grey façade adorned with a spattering of dark patches. They entered through heavy glass doors. Walls were carefully decorated with framed images of horses in action poses. The street sounds fell away and they found a small table towards the rear with heavy chairs and permanent menus exposed through a transparent tablecloth. An aproned girl followed them to their table and accepted an order of coffees and toasted sandwiches.

Alex relaxed in his seat and regarded Tessa with a smile. This was better. He felt a bit more in control on this more neutral turf.

The discussion picked up where they had left off. "So, is this a regular thing for you? I mean, do you go around with a wand spreading money and good cheer to the needy every day? I'd always had law firms pegged as a form of parasite that sucked the life out of victims."

She laughed. "No, I do good and evil on alternate days. Tuesdays I ride a broom to work, cackle madly and print outrageous invoices."

The coffees were delivered to the table. The froth had been worked with a toothpick to form a vague horse shape. Torn sachet's of sugar failed to sink into the coffee and had to be pushed down by teaspoon.

"Seriously, what you've told me so far sounds pretty wacky. I get that your firm acts as executors and winds up estates, but fifteen years and counting sounds a bit slack to me. Suddenly you snag me out of the blue offering what looks like a pretty major career change. I need to know a lot more about how this happened and what you would expect of me. Seven million dollars to split up sounds like a lot, but it won't last long if it gets divided up to a group of people you haven't found yet."

"Alright Alex, I'll be straight with you. But first, it's not seven million. I said that this is what your father came to us with. He knew that his request would take a little while to act out even then, so he authorised his prize money to be held in a secured interest bearing

account. My old boss set things up, but when your father died, he was in no rush to carry out complicated bequests. It just rolled over each year and it was pretty much ignored. I found the portfolio about six weeks ago among a lot of smaller unfinished jobs. Fifteen years of compounding interest was very kind to the holding account. Last time I checked it was sitting at eighteen and a half million."

Tessa paused while lunches arrived at their table and sipped the coffee.

"I brought the case to the attention of the Partners. It was a pretty big embarrassment. Bad news for the firm if it gets out that client instructions are not being fulfilled. I was directed to come up with options on how to complete the original brief. It became obvious that it could not be done without a *lot* of research in the field. This is something we are ill-equipped to do, but I was able to turn up links to you Alex. You're the earliest descendant from your father's umm... *adventures*. More importantly, it looks like you're someone we can work with on this case."

Alex waved his hands expansively. "This is the part I don't get. What do you *really* know about me?"

"I know that you are much more than the simple Auto-Electrician that you claim to be. I spoke with one of your former employers at the car dealership and learned more from some of your clients, all of which hold you in high regard. You have extensive computer and technical skills. You have a reputation for researching and solving difficult problems. You declined offers of fixed employment on several occasions because you prefer to be your own boss... even though you earn much less that way. You have no family ties and you like to shift to a new area every few years. Plus you have a reputation for honesty and straight business. I took this profile to

the Partners and they agreed that the best way to wind up this case was to persuade you to do the investigation. This plan is consistent with your father's original instructions. I have been appointed as case contact. This means you would do the legwork in the field and I get to track progress and follow up with the legal support."

Tessa folded her arms and leaned forward on the table. "If you don't accept the job, you will still inherit a good share. Enough to make servicing farming machinery unnecessary, but I suspect you won't do nothing for a living."

Alex had been working through his sandwiches as she spoke. He continued to chew in silence for a few moments. What he had learned did make sense. It was true that he had little reason to continue as he had been. Certainly he was becoming curious about the blanks in his family heritage. The \$50,000 bank cheque in his pocket proved the seriousness of the proposal. He didn't know all the details, but a life of working for himself had taught him to make decisions when enough facts were presented.

Alex took another sip of coffee, wiped his mouth with a serviette and nodded slowly. "Okay, I'm in. What's next."

Chapter 4

A few days had passed since his city meeting. The bank cheque had been placed in his account and cleared. A larger amount would be

forthcoming, but it would take a couple of months to extract from the parent fund. Alex had settled the lease of his rented apartment, placed a few items in storage and abandoned most of his meagre furnishings to the home he left behind. Closely packed under the stretch tarpaulin in his ute were his clothes, his test equipment, spare parts and a collection of technical manuals. These tools had been the centre of daily life for some years. Part of him knew it was unlikely he'd use much of it again, but it was unthinkable to leave them behind.

The day was dry and warm when Alex followed the North-West highway out of Melbourne. The green hills of Cragieford were a long way behind him. Here the climate was much drier than his familiar hills to the East, with the land on both sides of the road resembling a sea of rocks and straw coloured grasses. His first stop was Maryborough. It was a medium sized country town that still held some memories. His adopted parents had raised him there. His earliest recollections were of the daily walks to a red brick school building, which was probably still in service somewhere. Maryborough was a good place to start. It would be important to get a feel for his father's work. So far, he was just a name. For better or worse, he had to learn more about this stranger called Benjamin Caslow.

Some preparations had been made. Alex realised that it would complicate matters if he were to drift into different towns with the explanation that he was looking for certain people to give an inheritance. That approach would close more doors than it would open and invite subterfuge from wanabe stakeholders. Instead he had devised a cover story of his intention to produce a book about the staircases built by the 'famous' Ben Caslow. For all he knew, it could be true, but for now it was a simple reason for him to make enquiries about his father's legacy. Alex had already called the

Maryborough council offices with his intention to investigate the man and his work. A council aide had agreed to take him to the old offices and briefly permit an inspection of the spiral stair. Calling ahead was always important when dealing with public service providers. To show up cold turkey and ask for help was to interrupt whatever the staff had been doing and often turned into rejection. It was easier to call first, request a future commitment, then hold them to that when showing up in person.

As he approached the town buildings and sheds became more abundant, signs warned motorists of fire danger periods and the road separated into a dual carriageway. His GPS led him to a motel about half a kilometre short of the town centre. The entrance was adorned with 'Free Wi-fi' signs and a man dressed only in shorts and hat was coiling a hose next to the pool. A bubbly receptionist exchanged his credit card details for a room key and he entered a bright room with a queen size bed, a few forgettable pictures on the walls, a small desk and the head of an air conditioner mounted above a narrow mirror. Good enough. Alex tossed a single clothes bag on a chair and pulled out his notebook computer. The Internet connection came easy and he made himself comfortable for work.

It was important to know more about spiral staircases if he were to portray himself as a writer collecting research about them.

His present knowledge was very basic. How complicated could a set of stairs be? A quick Google search took him to a Wikipedia page that revealed fragments of information. Spiral stairs were a great solution for people to reach elevated rooms without wasting too much floor space. It seems that they can be made with a central core called a 'newel', or could climb the inside of a walled shaft with no central core. Apparently Romans made quite a lot of them. *Ha!* he mused, '*Add one more thing to the list of 'what the Romans have*

done for us'. One of the challenges of spiral stair construction seemed to be tread spacing. If the stair wound around a small core and the steps were too shallow, then clearance became a problem and the climber could whack their head on the underside of the spiral above. Too much step rise made them painfully steep. Lots of older people had died climbing spiral stairs too fast.

It became plain that there was a fair level of art involved. He found many references to an exotic wooden stair at a Santa Fe Chapel in the USA that had no central core for support. Another fact revealed itself. It seems that most spiral stairs rose with a clockwise turn because apparently it was easier for right-handed swordsmen to defend themselves from an attacker rising below them. He made a mental note to never attack anyone with a sword on an *anticlockwise* stair.

Alex lowered the lid to his notebook and prepared a coffee from basic ingredients that came with the room. The powdered milk was pretty nasty and he vowed to buy some fresh milk soon. Between sips he checked the charge and available memory space in his phone-camera. Internet pictures of staircases were one thing. In an hour he was to get his first close look at a real one and wanted to record the details.

The Council offices were fronted not by the expected reception desk, but by a series of small partitioned counters. A few people milled about in front of him holding little triangles of numbered paper. These were being dispensed by a narrow wall-mounted vending machine. Fragments of conversation were difficult to ignore, a woman wanted to complain about rate rises to her home. Another wanted to silence noisy neighbours from doing loud band practise on weeknights. In under five minutes he faced a young girl with a forced smile and a 'how can I help you' expression.

"Hi, I'm here to see a mister John Panitch this morning." The girl nodded once, evidently pleased to resolve the enquiry easily. She spoke into her phone briefly and returned it to its cradle. "He'll be down to see you shortly." And gestured to a space at the wall behind him, where sure enough, a choice of three unoccupied chairs awaited his presence.

Alex quietly eyed off a stand of brochures that wanted to inform ratepayers about rubbish collection schedules, dealing with Parkinson's disease and lists of things that tourists may want to see.

Preceded by the clack of an electric latch, a security door to the right of the counter opened and a tall bearded man stepped out. "Mister Kingbridge?" Alex nodded and they briefly shook hands.

"Please follow me. I hope this won't take long as I have a busy morning"

They stepped onto the street and walked quickly to an adjacent building that was much older than the one they had left. "About twenty years ago we ran out of office space in this old building and built the new offices alongside. Now we mostly use it for record storage" A key was produced to unlock the door and they both entered. The foyer was bright from the daylight streaming through the front windows, but ignoring this, the aide flipped a series of switches and a ceiling thick with fluorescent tubes pulsated into life.

Walls were clad with a dark mahogany panelling while the floors were a stark chequerboard of black and white tiles.

Walking loudly down a wide hallway they arrived at a second smaller foyer and suddenly a grand staircase arose majestically in front of them. The treads and underside of the spiral were coloured in the same dark red as the foyer walls. The aged newspaper clipping had not done justice to what towered above him now. The stair rose one full turn around a panelled timber core the colour of honey, perhaps a half metre in diameter. It finished on a mezzanine level where the ends of metal document racks could be seen. The hand rail was supported by elaborately turned dowels of the same honey colour before it smoothly spiralled into itself at the foot of the stair. The leading edge of each tread was bound with a filigreed brass strip to reduce wear and contain foot slippage.

The council aide spoke with some pride. "It's a beaut, isn't it? There had been a move to demolish this building, but this stair was the reason this entire building was preserved. When we spoke on the phone you said that you knew who'd built it"

Alex caressed the end of the handrail and gazed with admiration at the craftsmanship. "His name was Benjamin Caslow. I'm making a record of his work, but I believe this is the first one that he'd built." He crouched down to the first tread and on the face of the first riser was the ornately carved text '*April*'. Alex traced the letters with his fingertips.

The aide offered; "I always thought that was strange. Why would someone carve the month it was built, without adding the day or year?"

With a pang he had not felt before, Alex was feeling a tangible connection to his past. Without elaborating he replied; "It's not a date, it's the name of a woman." He arose and stepped back a few paces. "If it's ok with you I'll take some pictures while the light is good."

"I hope your camera flash isn't going to fade and damage our paintings."

The citing of this urban myth prompted Alex to give him a pained look. "You're thinking of the old xenon flash technology which gave a burst of light that was rich in ultraviolet. My phone just pulses an LED that's probably weaker than the fluro lights above us. I assure you, nothing will be damaged."

The heavy layer of cloud cover outside nicely diffused what could have been harsh shadows of direct sunlight. He collected a few images from both the top and bottom of the stair and some wide shots from the same vantage as the old newspaper clipping seen in Tessa's office. He then traversed the stair length several times while the council officer fidgeted below. Earlier he'd naively suspected the stair would feel like some kind of springy corkscrew, prone to bounce like a rope bridge when travelled, but this structure was so much more than that. He felt the burgundy texture of the hand rail beneath his fingers and the solid mass of wooden treads that rose around his feet with a life of their own. There was no discernable bounce. Alex had never been much of an observer of art, but right now something was telling him that he was witnessing a perfect blend of form and function that was true art.

Ten minutes later there was little more to be done. He wanted to remain longer, but had run out of valid reasons and the impatience of his host was beginning to show. Alex thanked him for his time, repacked the camera and returned to the car.

He didn't immediately start the engine, but stared unseeingly at the dashboard. "Wow." The word escaped without an awareness of having spoken out loud. Alex had found his link to his past where he'd believed none existed, right in the centre of his childhood town.

Alex started the car and drove aimlessly around the streets. They were vaguely familiar, but most shopfronts failed to match personal recollections, then the red brick building of his first school came into view. Like the council offices, it was an old building with a high pitched roof that had been eclipsed by a more utilitarian school building alongside. He remembered the daily walks to the school from the home of his foster parents and now absently retraced this same path with the car.

It was strange. On one level the place felt new and he'd never been there, paradoxically memories existed for every house and front gate in sight, which produced a familiarity that could have stemmed from an old movie or documentary he may have once seen. Logically he knew that these experiences were his own.

Alex paused out the front of the weatherboard house that had been his home. The colour had changed and the late model cars parked in the street out the front seemed out of place. The paths were the same and he recognised the remnants of a rooster silhouette in a weather vane he had attached to a chimney as being one of his own projects.

Upon returning to the hotel, he put a call through to Tessa back at the Melbourne law firm.

"Hi, I thought I'd give you an update. The meeting at the Maryborough staircase went quite well."

She seemed pleased to hear from him. "Great, what did it look like?"

"It was extraordinary. Whoever originally ordered the stair probably just wanted a functional way to reach the next level, but what they got was really quite exceptional. I can see how a stair like this would take months to build. I captured some good images. I'll email them to you later today."

"Were you able to learn anything more about your parents?"

"No. Not really. I didn't find anyone who could recall details of when the stair was built, or who did the work. Still, it was worth the visit. It's given me a better idea of the scale of his work. Tomorrow I'm going to move on to the town on the top of our list and find out what he did there. Next time you hear from me I should be in *West Wyalong*."

Chapter 5

A long way West of Sydney and over the Blue Mountains, the land flattens out and becomes arid. Towns are spaced further apart and the impatience of city life is diminished. Nearly four hundred kilometres from the coast, *West Wyalong* marks the intersection of two outback highways. It grew from a gold mining boom more than a century ago, but had since become an agricultural hub. Today

eucalyptus oil and a variety of grain crops are produced in large volumes. It differed from most planned settlements of the same era, as many of the roads were cut by pioneer bullock teams zig-zagging around tree stumps and rocks that no longer exist. This road construction legacy now gives a uniquely chaotic flavour to the main streets in the town.

It took a long time for Alex to reach West Wyalong. The road trip gave him time to think about his mission and speculate about the sort of man his father must have been. He was yet to find anyone who knew him personally, leaving only a string of deeds and structures by which a shadow of his persona could be recreated. This, Alex knew, was not enough. By following the trail of Ben Caslow's work, he hoped that more substance about the man would eventually be revealed. Following a chain of rest breaks and fuel stops, Alex arrived at the outskirts of the town. It was a chore adjusting to the low 50kph limit after the long hours of highway cruising. He knew there'd be unmarked police vehicles with radar, ready to pounce on any hint of non-compliance and reserved a part of his mind to scan for telltale clues on parked cars with their characteristic thin VHF antennas and tinted windows.

Car dealerships and tyre depots gave away to the main shopping strip. He slowly idled through the town trying to fathom what sort of offer would have drawn his father to this place. No doubt he could have accepted plenty of regular carpentry work, but the evidence so far showed he had held out for the specialised stair work that would require his particular skills. Alex could see that West Wyalong had plenty of double level brick buildings of historic worth. Many street corners had old hotels and public buildings, so he suspected that very little had changed since his father's time. Benjamin Caslow had come to town armed with his tools of trade to build a staircase. But where was it?

Alex urgently needed a base to work from, but if he didn't find a place soon, the town would just fade away to farms and paddocks again. Still on the main road, he spied an up-market looking motel with a glowing vacancy sign. Easing the car through an arched entrance it expanded into a small courtyard. Lots of numbered doors faced the open space and a few of them had cars parked between fresh white lines extending from each room. The reception area was well signposted.

Alex pulled up in front of this and entered through a sliding security door clad in fly-resistant mesh. A withered man who looked like he ought to have retired long ago, took his details and with a bony hand, slid a room key and internet access card over the counter. Alex had provided the Collins street law firm address as a point of contact, simply because he had none other to give. The price was higher than he would have accepted in the past, but with a fist full of dollars now in the bank, there was little point in shopping around for a better deal. He could afford it.

The room was a well appointed upstairs suite, with modest kitchen facilities and a small balcony that opened onto the main street. From here he could see a number of buildings that could well contain the stair he sought, but simply looking up the main street was not enough. He was going to need some local knowledge.

Alex unpacked his bags, showered and changed. It was late in the day and the peak of the heat had passed, making it an agreeable time to go for a walk. On the street most shops had closed for the day, a few remained open a little longer to snag a vestige of passing trade. Nearly all facades were old, but reasonably well maintained. Still, Alex was dismayed by the number of shops that were empty. Their window frontages were just unadorned voids, littered with dead moths and flies.

He passed a 'two-dollar' discount store that pedalled imported Chinese tools and house-wares. Here a teenage shop assistant was pushing trays of displayed merchandise from the footpath back into the store, a sure indicator to the end of the days trade. While he passed Alex peered into what seemed a cavernous room of cheap parts and silently vowed to return at some stage for a browse. He had need for some replacement elastic straps to secure a flapping corner of his vehicle tarpaulin.

A little further up the street there were two classic hotels on opposite corners that must have stared at each other for a century. Both flaunted sandwich boards showing 'specials' for bistro meals, and a variety of other signs telling when to find bingo, happy hours and half-price 'parmigiana' nights. The low sun shone weakly under the large veranda of the closest hotel, tantalisingly illuminating the way to the main bar. Alex wondered in.

Several screens showed the same images of a race track where horses were being pressed into stalls. A few tables were occupied by bored looking men studying newspapers for race form. Some were chatting on mobile phones.

He found a vacant stool at the bar between two patrons spaced several seats apart where they quietly focused on their own beers. A man behind the bar with a dark ponytail and a close beard was busy loading a fridge with small bottles. Looking up, he suspended his work and approached the bar where he delivered a well-rehearsed: "Hi, what'll it be?"

"A midi of light please" At the last moment, Alex remembered the correct way to describe the glass size, now that he'd crossed the state border. A ten dollars note that he placed on the bar was

replaced by a tall beer and a few coins. A sip confirmed it was a nice brew and very cold. "Thanks. It hits the spot. Are the bistro meals up yet?" The barman used a rag to mop up around the beer tap with practised movements and glanced at the clock on the rear wall. "Give it 5 minutes and they'll be taking orders."

Alex decided that this was a good time to press for some information. "I'm in town for a few days doing some research on a book about historical architecture. Do you know of any buildings around here with a spiral staircase?" The barman paused, frowned for a moment, then continued wiping. "Spiral staircase? Nah, don't think so." The drinker on the right wearing a John Deere baseball cap offered a question. "What about *Kelly's*?" Drinker two on the left wore a tartan shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbows and parroted "What *about* Kellys?" The hat man responded. "I think *Kelly's* has a spiral staircase." A fresh topic had been launched to fill the vacuum of conversation and took on a life of its own.

"Nup, you're dreamin. *Kelly's* don't have a spiral stair. It's three straight stairs that goes up in a square with a couple of landings."

"Well that's a sort of a spiral isn't it?"

"Nup. A spiral stair has gotta be curly, like when an apple has been cut curly." He looked at Alex for approval who nodded. "Yes, curly, but...." Tartan shirt man interrupted "Apples don't have to be curly, they can be cut into wedges too."

"Yes, but then they wouldn't be spiral would they? Say...Brian might know. He used to drink at *Kelly's*." The tartan shirt man leaned back on his stool and lifted his voice. "Hey Brian, You used to drink at *Kelly's*. Haven't they got a spiral stair?" The hat man quickly supplied. "He drank there until Old Alf threw him out."

Brian, evidently one of the men at a table, lowered his form guide and spoke delicately. "Alf and I had a disagreement about the quality

of his beer and I left with grace."

"You left with his fuggin foot up your arse is what I heard." Tartan shirt parried.

"No I left with Grace Simmons, *after* Alf put his foot up my arse. I decided that I like the beer here better."

Alex was enjoying the banter. He hoped the conversation would drift back to his topic, but was afraid to force it just yet.

"So where's Grace now?" hat wearer queried

"Grace is back at *Kelly's*. She says that she likes the toilets there better than here, but I don't give a shit."

"Well, if you don't give a shit, how would you know what the toilets are like?"

The tartan shirt wearer bluntly asked "So...are they straight over there or not?"

Brian scratched his chin and ruminated. "I'm pretty sure Alf's straight. Grace would have said something if he wasn't. Still, the other barman there, 'Ray', paints his nails and I've often wondered about that."

"No, not Alf or Ray. Is the staircase there straight or curly?"

Brian closed his eyes and pointed at invisible things with his fingers while he strained to recreate a stair journey in his mind. He opened his eyes again. "No, I'm pretty sure the stairs are straight too. They

just seemed a little curly on the way down, but that could have been me. Why? Who wants to know?"

Suddenly no one was talking and everyone was looking at Alex again.

"I heard a story that about thirty years ago a fancy spiral staircase was fitted somewhere in the town and I'm trying to find it. I'm doing a book on them. Seemed to me that the hotels were a good place to start."

"I recon I've seen one." A new voice joined the fray. Against the wall an older patron with a few wisps of white hair sat at a tiny table. His own newspaper was open, with a beer pegging one corner of it. On the opposite page stood a small transistor radio, with a thin cable that drove an earpiece, presumably to feed race results to the listener. He repeated. "I recon I've seen one at *Riley's*. Out the back somewhere. Y'know, the one with the blue balcony at the other end of Main Street."

Brian back at the centre table disagreed and shook his head. "Blue Balcony's not at *Riley's*. That's the *Southern Cross*."

The transistor radio man corrected. "Oh yeah, *Southern Cross* is right. That's where I saw one. Can't remember much about it but."

Alex asked no one in particular: "How many pubs do you have here?"

The barman dropped his rag and held up two hands, fingers spread wide.

"You have ten hotels?"

He shrugged and resumed wiping his taps. "It's a thirsty place."

Many heads nodded in unison. A voice offered: "Then there's the *RSL*." Another... "And the *Bowling Club*." Yet another. "Don't forget the *Golf Club* and the *Working Man's Club*." Without looking up the barman reiterated. "Yep. It's a thirsty place."

Conversation dwindled and people returned to their respective form guides and drinks. A middle-aged woman with a stylish red streak in her greying hair carried a chalk board that listed meal specials and propped it in front of a dormant fireplace. Evidently the evening meals were now on. Alex finished his beer, ordered another and carried it with him to the bistro area. His first efforts of gathering info from a public bar were not great, but knowing a little more about where not to look was still useful.

Chapter 6

The following morning Alex added to the ground work. He located the blue-balconied *Southern Cross* hotel and made some enquiries there. The woman behind the bar did confirm the presence of a spiral stair, but this was a tight steel-tread affair that led into the basement beer store. While it was an intriguing structure, it had been in place a full forty years before his father had come to town.

Alex visited a few more hotels, attempting to tap into some local knowledge. He learned many things about many people, but nothing more about the elusive staircase. Having consumed more ale than was comfortable, Alex worked his way back to his motel room on foot. Laying prone on the bed, the room seemed to be rotating around an unmoving ceiling fan. After only a couple of minutes, he drifted into a few hours of restless sleep.

That afternoon he hit the road again. The council planning offices were particularly unhelpful. After being directed to a curt planning department operative, Alex learned that they may well have spiral staircase plans somewhere, but files were only indexed by application date and customer name. Older files were archived and unreachable without 'special permission'. The sour looks he received suggested this was unlikely to happen.

Only a block from the Planning Department were the offices of the *Wyalong Mercury* community newspaper. Here, the staff were more cooperative, but they too had no memory of any articles relating to a large spiral stair. A red-haired youth who tried to help suggested that the Wyalong Museum up Main Street had some older members who may recall something, but they were volunteer staff and the museum was only manned three days per week. Today was an 'off' day.

A few minutes later Alex found himself at an outdoor table in front of a bakery nursing a mug of coffee and a cube of vanilla slice; contemplating his next move. From here there was a good view of the West Wyalong streetscape in each direction. Traffic was slight and the few people he could see on the warm afternoon seemed in no particular hurry to reach their destination.

Alex's mobile phone chattered out a ring tone that broke the torpor. He checked the screen before answering with a deliberately glib response.

"Well hello Miz Rathdown of *Blomfield & Close*, how may I help you today?"

"It's a slow and dreary day here in Melbourne. Your work seems far more interesting, so I'm checking up on you. Have you made any progress?"

"I've seen and heard many interesting things in this town. It is a thirsty place in a lonely part of the state. There are plenty of old buildings that could well conceal the fancy staircase we're looking for. The thing is, it's also a gossipy place, but no one I have found yet has ever heard of one. It's a worrying development. Was it in a building that burned down? Am I somehow in the wrong town? I'm running out of options up here."

"I don't think so Alex. There is not a lot of material here from Ben Caslow and you have already seen most of it. I found a memo from my predecessor, more of a note from a phone conversation really. It reads: '*Ben says that he has always taken pride in his work, except for that disappointing result at West Wyalong.*' I'm not sure what to make of that, except it's further proof that you're in the right town."

Alex absently rubbed his chin. "That's pretty dammed cryptic. Perhaps he built a staircase that collapsed, ...or maybe the stair was fine but his girlfriend dumped *him* before he left."

"No, that can't be true. Remember we have the list because it represents towns where he worked and girls he left behind. If he didn't want to leave them something, then the town wouldn't be on

the list." Tessa paused, then added: "One action you could pursue is to take out an advert in the local newspaper saying you are looking for a staircase of a certain type."

"Mmm.. I'd already considered that. Yes it's an option, but it would create more publicity about the project than I'd like at this stage. Plus it could take weeks to come up with a response, while I'm just killing time on a motel room bed flipping playing cards into a hat. Lets just push that idea into the Plan-B column for a while. I still have a few more leads to follow yet."

"Ok Alex, we'll leave it there. If I come up with any ideas I'll call you back. In the mean time, good luck."

Without anything to add, Alex completed the call and focused his attention on the rest of the coffee and cake. With that done, he thoughtfully made his way back to his room.

A quiet night passed, sometimes broken by the forlorn sound of freight trains ramping up their immense engines to shunt grain trucks. Occasionally there was an echoing bark of exhaust brakes as long-haul trucks approached the town in the still air. Alex awoke early with a harsh yellow sun rising in a cloudless sky. Near horizontal rays of light through the blinds lifted dust motes in the air above his bed. It was going to be another warm day.

Some internet search time looking for key words and phrases added nothing new. He killed a bit more time purchasing fuel and breakfast groceries before arriving out the front of the *Wyalong Goldfield*

Museum. A footpath board declaring 'MUSEUM OPEN' confirmed it was the right day for a visit. It was evident that the museum had once been a fire station of some note. Built from red brick and topped with a slate roof, he could see the ornate arches and gargoyles that adorned each of three large wooden doors. Such historic edifices were always a quandary for towns after an original building function had been replaced. Everyone wanted to keep them, but what to use them for? With their strong links to the past already in place, museums run by volunteers were an obvious choice.

Alex wandered inside, saw an unattended counter near the entrance with a vacant stool behind it, He paused briefly and peered at a few nearby exhibits. A coarse, rhythmic chattering sound came through the open door of a side room. It sounded like a metal tin full of bolts being rapidly shaken. It stopped, then started again. To Alex it struck a chord of familiarity. He had heard that sound before. A elderly staff member was leaning intently over an old telex machine with its top lifted up like a car bonnet. It was chugging loudly, but not printing anything. He looked up briefly, saw that a visitor had come in, and resumed looking at the machines innards. He was a man in his seventies with a well groomed, freshly shaven look and a white shock of hair carefully combed back behind his ears. A neat burgundy bow-tie crested the top of his white shirt and a knitted vest with a carefully placed name badge completed the picture. It said '*Clive - Curator*'. It was more than a simple name label, it was a bold statement and badge of honour for the wearer. With a well modulated voice he spoke loudly over the sound of the machine. "I want to set this thing up for kids to play with. It was donated with lots of paper and punch tape, but the wretched thing just rattles and nothing else."

Alex approached and peered inside the machine with the curator. A maze of mechanical gears cams and rods moved and flopped in

unison. He offered the words "May I?" and without waiting for a reply put his hand in the machine and held down a small armature with an index finger. The clattering ceased and the motor within ran smoothly and quietly. He held it down for a few moments then removed his hand and the loud clattering resumed.

The curator turned off the power at the mains outlet and the machine ground to a halt. "Well, isn't that something. I've been fiddling with this infernal device on and off for days and I never got it to do that before."

Alex smiled. "I've played around with these things before. They were made to operate on a loop of current over a telephone line where they could talk to another machine. As you type, you break the loop with a code, so that the same text will come up on both machines. Just sitting here on the desk, there's no loop and it doesn't know what to do. All I did was to hold in a coil so it thought there was a loop, it still won't do anything, but it's quieter."

The curator grinned and repeated; "Well isn't that something. Nobody seems to know anything about these things anymore." He introduced himself and shook Alex's hand. "I'm Clive. Do you think you could make the keyboard work? It seems too good to just leave it gathering dust. We get a lot of families in here and it'd be nice to give the kids something to play with while the parents look around."

"Mmm....probably. It looks like it's in good condition. These things have an internal loop that we can tap into. If I put a resistor on that socket in the back, we can probably fool it enough to make it work. I probably have some in the car somewhere."

"That would be nice. I can't pay you anything. Cash is pretty scarce, but I can put together a fine pot of tea." He beamed at Alex, willing him to accept the deal.

He nodded. "Put the jug on and I'll see what I can do." Alex returned to his car to retrieve his service kit.

The curator looked on while Alex made a few simple connections. Ten minutes later the machine ran smoothly while he pecked at the keyboard. The machine faithfully replicated everything he typed on the old roll of Telex paper. "It is a bit faint. I think the old ribbon has dried out. Maybe you can take it out and let some fresh ink soak into it. Otherwise, the machine seems fine." He closed the mouse-brown lid with a snap. "You just need to remember to press the figures button before typing numbers and the text button before returning to letters." He grinned. "A bit like text messaging on a phone, except the Germans figured it all out about eighty years ago. So...how about that tea?"

He was led into a back room with a small kitchen and was invited to sit on a hard chair adjacent to an antique dining table.

Clive placed a pot on a tile in the centre of the table, added a plate of biscuits, then produced some elegant cups and began to pour. "I appreciate what you've done for us here. It's made my day, even before lunch time. But now I feel guilty because you've come here as a visitor and I've put you to work. If you don't mind my asking, how did you learn of such things?"

Alex waved his hands dismissively. "My step father had one of these machines at home. He was a technician in the army once and liked to play with electrical machinery. He kept a collection of typed pictures stored on paper tape and would print some for me when I was a kid. Got me interested in things electrical and mechanical. He's not alive now, but we both have him to thank today." He lifted his cup of tea in salute.

This seemed like a good time to raise the questions he had come here to ask. "If you don't mind I'd like to ask you about something. I'm in town trying to track down an item and I'm not sure where to look." His host didn't reply, but quietly sipped his tea and waited.

Alex decided that the man before him was a careful person and would respond better with the short version of the truth. "About thirty years ago my father Ben Caslow worked in this town for several months as a carpenter. I've been trying to trace his movements during that time."

"Hmm. I take it that you can't simply ask him what he did while he was in town."

Alex shook his head. "I can't do that. He died about 15 years ago and I never really knew him."

"That doesn't give you much to go on, unless you know what he was doing while he was here."

"I have one clue to work with. He was a specialist in building wooden spiral staircases. I believe that somewhere in this town he built one, or at least tried to, and I don't know where."

The curator said "Hmm" again and placed his hands on the table. "I've lived most of my life in this town and I'm sorry to say I have never heard of a Ben Caslow and I've never heard of a spiral staircase being built anywhere around here."

Alex was becoming all too familiar with this answer and had hoped for more. He smiled grimly. Well...thanks anyway. I'm going to keep looking around the town and see what I can find. They both took another biscuit.

After a minute of contemplation the curator spoke again. "If you have the time, there's a man I would like to introduce you to. His name is Bernard. A good friend of mine." He waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, he won't know anymore about a staircase in this town than I do, but he is a superb carpenter and I believe you need to know a bit more about what your father would have been up against with this kind of work." He twisted in his chair to glance at an ornate wall clock. "Come back here at four when we close and we'll pay him a visit."

"Yes, I'd like that. I'm still trying to learn about his tradecraft. Maybe it will help."

There was a sound of footsteps in the foyer as some genuine visitors arrived and this signalled the end of the tea break. The curator

stood and placed his cup in the small sink. "It seems I have fresh guests to attend to. I thank you again for your help and I'll see you at the end of the day.

Alex nodded and followed the example in the sink with his own cup. Together they returned to the foyer. He departed the building, slid behind the wheel of his car and thoughtfully drove back to the motel room.

Chapter 7

The day was another dusty cloudless one in what seemed to be an unending series. The motel room had warmed considerably in the past few hours and turning on the room air conditioner was justified. After assembling a simple lunch of bread, cheese and sliced meats, he activated the room television and filled in a quiet afternoon with a documentary on migrating wildebeest in Eastern Africa.

Alex mused that his life had been a lonely one of sorts, but that had not bothered him in the past. Money had never been a big motivator, not that he'd ever had a great deal of it. When a few dollars came his way he never thought to save or buy expensive items, he would drift for a while until pressure for basic necessities drove him back to work. This inheritance was doubtless going to change his life, but it hadn't been earned in the way he was accustomed and didn't yet feel real. Certainly, he had never been curious about his own past before. It was what it was and to pursue it would have seemed like a streak of vanity that was not a part of his form. Still, this mission had taken on a life of its own and he was enjoying the challenge. He found himself looking forward to those occasions where he shared his progress with Tessa back in Melbourne. At first it had made him inwardly laugh by the way it reminded him of spy thrillers, where the

reckless field agent reported back to a 'handler' in a windowless office somewhere, but his present arrangement was far more casual. There were no evil megalomaniacs in sight and thus far nobody was trying to kill him. In truth, the town here was starting to grow on him. The people just quietly went about their lives and were content with whatever he had to say, without pressing for gossip on his origins and motives. It was about as un-pretentious as any place he had ever visited. Somewhere towards the end of the program he'd dozed in the heat of the afternoon. The clock showed the day had advanced close to his 4pm meeting time and he made preparations to depart.

A short time later found Alex propped in his car at the museum carpark. After a few minutes he saw Clive lock and leave the building. The old curator made his way over to the car, stared curiously at the white scratches down the side of the vehicle and the plastic on the window and slid into the passenger seat next to Alex.

"Good afternoon young'un. Head that way" Clive gestured with a pointed finger. "It's not far and I called ahead, so he is expecting us." He looked again at the ratty cling wrap on the window which was still trying its hardest to be transparent, but was failing badly.

Alex followed his gaze. "Yeah, it's not very good. I should really do something about it."

They drove to an older residential area, prolific with fine single level houses with sharp hedges and white fences. "I have only known Bernard for about ten years. He moved to the area when he retired

and has helped the museum considerably with some volunteer carpentry work. He's a superb craftsman and I value his opinions."

They pulled up out the front of a neat fibro and brick composite house with a bright terra-cotta roof. The lawn and nature strip were so immaculate that no weed would have the impertinence to invade this fine turf. A long concreted driveway led past the house to a double garage at the rear where the doors were open. There was no room for cars, as the space was filled with timber racks and woodworking machinery. The sounds of coarse sweeping could be heard and they came upon a small, weathered man pressing wood shavings into a heap below a workbench. The pegboard walls were lined with racks of hand tools.

Clive made a brief introduction. "Bernard, here is the gent I told you of." They shook hands. His palms were cool and dry, like stiffened leather that had seen a lifetime of work, which was probably the case. His voice was soft almost squeaky and Alex had to listen carefully to catch all that was said.

"The day is done. So do yer fancy a beer?" Alex nodded. "Thank you I'd like that." A tiny bar fridge was opened and two cans were produced, slid into foam holders and one was passed to Alex. "I know Clive, won't have one. He says his doctor won't let him. But then again, my doctor won't let me have one either. Fuck him." He gestured at some tall stools for his guests to mount and with practised flair he released the tab on his beer with a flat bladed screwdriver. Alex could see that his nails were too short to open the can by fingers alone.

"So, your father was a builder of staircases then? He's picked a tough trade. A stair builder has to know a lot of things. It's more than just tools and wood. Stairbuilding is a mix of art and mathematics that goes way past the average craftsman."

Alex responded quietly. "I never knew my father and have only recently come to know of his work. Stairs were his specialty and I don't know much about them. I saw one of his spiral stairs down south in Maryborough. It was a magnificent thing, but I won't pretend to know how he'd put it all together." He removed his phone from a top pocket, quickly sifted through a collection of stored images and held up a wide shot of the Maryborough stair, although the tiny image lacked detail, he was able to move fingertips apart on the image and zoom in on different parts of the structure.

Bernard peered at the screen and nodded in satisfaction. "You need to understand that a staircase, particularly a spiral staircase, is a very specialised item to build. Wood wants to grow straight, most parts of a spiral stair need to be curved. It takes a lot of skill to persuade wood to take these shapes without compromising its integrity. I've made plenty of furniture in my work over lots of years, but I was never much good at stairs. Still, I've got a lot of respect for those who can." He paused for another drink, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, then absently rubbed his hand on his pants.

"With a spiral stair the size of the core sets the minimum tread width. The designer must carefully work out the height that must be climbed and balance this against constants that apply to each riser and tread. This sets the starting point and the amount of rotation the stair will have. Where the core is more than a single column, there must be an inside hand rail as well as an outside rail. This must curl at a much different rate to match the height of the outside rail. The joins in these curves need to be perfect or they kink and look awful." He paused in thought briefly, then continued. "Tell me, the stair in your picture, with the hand rail supports, were they square or turned?"

The wide picture lacked detail, so Alex sent his mind back to the old council building. "They were all round. There was one on each tread."

The man nodded. "Yep, that's a lot of work. A lathe needs to be set up to follow a sample pattern, like a giant key-cutting machine. The turned wood needs to be dense and completely seasoned, or it will shrink and rattle in its sockets.

Alex nodded in appreciation and the old craftsman went on: "So to build a stair of this type your father would have needed several different types of wood for different parts of the project; specialist wood that only a good timber supplier would be able to get. Mixing timber creates unique problems in stairs, because as the air moisture changes, the different timber types expand and contract at different rates. Try to bond them together the wrong way and it will curl one way in the winter and a different way in the summer and squeak horribly for the rest of the year. The joins need to be dowelled and oiled in just the right way. Wooden staircases are like icebergs. The bits that you can see are only a small part of what's really in front of you."

Clive asked the question that Alex had been considering himself. "If a project of that type was going on in the town, who would know about it?"

Bernard ruminated over this question. "Hmm...It's just a slim possibility, but there were only a few timber suppliers in these parts

back then. Somebody in the supply chain may remember a special order of that size."

Alex felt that the suggestion had merit and he thanked the craftsman for it. It also raised a larger issue. So far he had been focused on the end result, that is where would the completed structure be and who would remember seeing it. There had to be a beginning to the story. Someone would have had the need for a spiral stair, the ability to source the funds to get it built and have the conviction to find someone to do the work. Perhaps banks were involved, but even if they knew where to look for the information, such organisations were not good at handing over details about their clients. Still, these approaches raised some possibilities to be examined.

Bernard gave a brief tour of his workshop, his tools and some of the projects he'd been working on. Maybe he was supposed to be retired, but it looked like his hands were pretty full regardless.

After a second round of refreshment the sun was dropping low and it looked like the day was coming to an end. The three shook hands and Alex prepared to leave. Clive signalled that he only lived around the corner and wanted to walk home. "I hope that you have some success with your search Alex. Call by the museum if you have the time and let me know how you're getting on. I must admit, you have me a bit interested now."

Alex agreed to this and departed from the home. The association with these men were new and tentative, but he felt like he had

made a couple of friends in a strange town and this was a positive step.

Chapter 8

Alex decided that he was a bit weary of large bistro meals, so he located a small supermarket where he procured half a roast chicken and some bread rolls before returning to his room for a quiet dinner on his own.

After the meal was done he returned his attention to his portable computer and cued up some fresh internet searches.

'Timber Suppliers – West Wyalong' There was a long list of merchants, but most were paid adverts for out-of-town suppliers. He re-sorted the search result by distance from the town centre and this forced the more distant merchants off the screen. Four suppliers were identified within the region. The differences between them were not evident from the listing but they all had street addresses to work with. Alex opened up a screen session of Satellite imagery for the region, entered the addresses of the four supplies then engaged roadside views so that he could see what these businesses looked like from the outside without having to drive to each place in person.

The first one showed a large, modern building that probably hadn't been around for long. It was part of a franchised chain of builder hardware suppliers. This merchant was discarded as being too new. The next two references were for outlets that were small hardware stores in retail strip shops that evidently sold limited quantities of timber and hardware. Not really the sort of place to go for

construction projects, but fine if someone just wanted to hang a picture on a wall or fix a letterbox. These possibilities were also set aside.

The remaining address revealed a mesh fence to a large yard and a captioned sign that said '*Roaches Timber Supplies*' A series of low wooden buildings could be seen behind the fence. It had the air of having been there a very long time. The chances of learning anything new were small, but better than zero. A visit to this place would be in order.

Early in the morning Alex was back in his car. Still unfamiliar with the town, he used his dashboard GPS to guide him to the address. Roaches Timber turned out to be about two kilometres from where he was staying. Nothing had changed from the roadside image posted on the internet, except now the gate was open and the yard beckoned his entry. There was an office-store building and many open fronted sheds where a large drop-saw and mill table could be seen. There were lots of dried potholes in the parking area that would be hellish deep puddles in the winter. Around the perimeter of the yard spread a cluster of a dozen shipping containers with doors open, showing the ends of stacked timber. In the centre of the yard, rows of treated pine fence posts and green tinged sleeper slabs marked their selection of outdoor timbers. He parked next to a caged box labelled *free firewood*, high with wooden blocks and off-cuts. The aged signs, silver-grey buildings topped with rusty iron, all reinforced his impression that this business had been here for a generation or two.

Alex walked past a shed where a primitive drop-saw could be seen midpoint on a long workbench. A scarred forklift was parked next to it. Entering the office, he was confronted by racks of dusty roofing materials and open drums of galvanised nails that were still sold by

the kilogram. Two men were behind a counter. A weathered, white-haired staffer was talking vigorously into the phone and nodding frequently. The other just sat on a stool watching the first. Alex approached him.

The stool-sitter pivoted and shifted his attention to Alex. "Whad y're after mate?" making the practised sentence sound like a single word.

"It's a bit tricky, but I'm trying to find info on orders for special timbers that could have been made here a very long time ago."

The reply was terse and reeked of disinterest. "Can't help ya mate. I dunno if we've got old records, but we've got no time to look right now."

The other salesman completed his call, and ignoring Alex addressed the stool sitter directly. "Can't get one. It's old and the best time he can give me is two weeks to prepare a second hand unit."

"Not good enough." Stool sitter replied "Inspection is still first thing tomorrow and if it's not working, they won't muck about, they'll blacklist our saw straight up." A silence of desperation ensued and Alex was still ignored. He waited a moment then offered: "You having some problems there?"

The white haired telephone user spoke absently. "It's our main timber saw... It works fine, but the only way they let us use it now is if the light sensor shuts the saw down when fingers get too close to

the blade. The sensor has been workin fine for a long time, but it slowly karked it. We've got a work safety inspection here in the mornin and we can't get another sensor before then. When it fails inspection, it'll get tagged and we'll have no saw for another three weeks until he comes back to town to re-inspect us."

Alex nodded with some appreciation of the problem, but he wanted to engage with these men to advance his own case. His experience in servicing farm equipment had taught him that when his language imitated the manner of the farmer, just a little, then whatever he said was much more likely to be believed. Alex drawled back: "Slowly failed you say. That's a clue right there. Normally if these things really shit themselves it's instant failure." He paused as though he were taking time to draw from a cigarette he didn't have. "I'd bet that you've got some crap in the optics. Sawdust. These things never seal proper. Got any compressed air?" The two men just stared at him and he continued: "Unscrew the lens, give it a good blast and try it again."

Stool sitter was the first to move. "I'll fetch the compressor."

Alex followed the white haired man to the saw. He could see a sensor securely mounted to a bracket above and to the right of the saw blade. It was old and a glass dome screwed into the underside with a serrated ring. Firmly grasping this, he unscrewed the lens several turns and it dropped into his hand. A sprinkling of sawdust could already be seen on the glass surface. The other salesman approached, dragging a small compressor on two wheels behind him. After connecting it to a power outlet, it burst noisily into life. He tugged on a hose reel with an air-trigger on the end. A few loud air blasts into the sensor produced a fair cloud of dust. Alex polished

the lens on his shirtfront, puffed on it for good measure and screwed it back in.

White hair activated the saw which keened loudly. He slowly moved a hand towards the spinning blade. As it passed into a yellow spot cast by the sensor, the saw screeched to a halt as power was cut and an electric brake clamped the drive shaft.

Nothing more needed to be said, but Alex drawled "There yer go." into the new silence anyway.

The white haired man smiled at Alex for the first time, offered a handshake and said: "I'm Jim Roache. What can I do for you today."

Alex introduced himself. "I'm in town trying to follow my father's movements when he worked here about thirty years ago. He did a lot of wooden staircase work somewhere around here. I wouldn't expect anyone to remember but I thought maybe there could be a record of some special orders. He probably ordered in some fancy timber that wouldn't normally be carried in the area. Maybe it came from here."

Jim nodded. "My father ran the show back then, but he was pretty careful with his paperwork. Lets get back t' the office."

Alex was led back to the main building and into a smaller office with a glass window that looked to the sales area. Jim continued. "The old man kept separate records when he ordered stock in from

Sydney or Melbourne." From under an obviously unused desk he dragged out a cardboard carton. "He died about eight years ago now, but I never got to throw anything away." A bundle of filthy ledger books with green covers were extracted and dumped on top of the desk. A small cloud of sawdust rose around the books and began to settle again. "If there were any special orders done, It'd be in here. Thirty years ago you say. What name are we looking for?"

"Benjamin Caslow." Alex supplied.

"There wasn't much being brought in back then. There are usually only about a dozen or so special orders each year." For a few minutes there was silence as pages were being turned over the likely date range. Alex spotted it first. The name B.Caslow appeared in the client column in three places over several months. There were some letter codes, some numeric values and the name of wholesalers and quoted prices. There were no addresses or contact details.

"What do these codes mean?" Alex pointed to KDJB, KDRG and HP34.

"Well, KDJB means Kiln Dried Jarrah Beams and KDRG would be Kiln Dried River Gum. Most of the timber we handle is just cut and stacked. Sometimes it gets used within a few months of being cut. That means its sap content is high and it will shrink and bend over time. Fine for regular construction, but special work would be wantin low-shrinkage. The Jarrah is dark red hardwood. It shows here it was brought in special from Pemberton in Western Australia. Very fine grain, tough with nice colour. The Kiln Dried part means that it'd

been stacked and oven baked to ensure it's completely stable before being used for detailed work. It was expensive, even back then. Now it's pretty hard to get.

The KDRG is the Kiln Dried River Gum. It's come from a Swan Hill sawmill, along the Murray river. Also very dense with a dark colour. Only available in short lengths because of the twisted way the trees grow."

"This last one, HP came from Tasmania. If it's what I think it is, it's really special. I never knew any of it ever came here. Huon Pine. Completely unobtainable now. It grows only in protected areas. Thousands of years old, light, machineable, golden yellow in colour. Cuts like trees that were made from Nylon. Back then logs could be found whenever they decided to build a new dam in the protected hills. They never really required the dams, but it gave them the excuse that they needed to log the precious wood. I've a small sugar bowl at home turned from a bit of Huon Pine. After twenty years, it still looks like moulded plastic." It says here he'd ordered sections of both new and second-hand wood."

"Second-hand wood? Isn't that unusual for a new project?"

"No, not really. Once a timber becomes hard to get, then older buildings made from it can be demolished and the timber recycled. It's so valuable, there can still be profit for the owner after the structure is replaced in steel or concrete. Your man could have sourced his reclaimed wood from a demolished barn or warehouse."

"Can I have a copy of this page?"

"Yeah, sure. You're bloody lucky it's here at all. I've thought about trashing these books a hundred times, but never got around to it. You've helped us today, so I'm glad to return the favour."

He peered again at the figures. "*HP34*. This is a bit odd. The 34 would mean a rack code where we held it while waiting for collection, but there's no collection date in the delivery column." He stared into space for a moment. "Rack 34...that'd be in the old shed. Come for a walk." He left the office and Alex followed.

They crossed the yard and passed between two containers. Behind these lay another low shed, its corrugated iron roof also brown with rust. The inside was filthy with dirt and cobwebs. Tiny beams of white light descended from the roof, scintillating with dust particles where the sun penetrated open nail holes. Jim produced a small pencil light and started counting rack numbers at each intersection of shelf space. He stopped at Rack 34. It was a large enough to have held thirty planks but only the ends of three broad planks could be seen, crusted in years of filth. He rubbed the top of these with fingertips and peered closely. "Bugger me. I knew we had some old stuff back here, but never really looked at it." He pointed at the long planks. "That's Huon pine. Ordered and paid for, but never collected."

Alex examined the cleaned patch. Even in this light he could see the fine grained, honey coloured wood.

Jim mused out loud. "That's amazin. Who would do that. Who would order this lot and never collect it? It's like buying gold bricks from a catalogue and leaving them at the post office."

Alex suggested, "It would've been for a project my father had been working on somewhere in the town, but I don't know why he never used it."

They agreed it was a mystery, but left it where it lay and retraced their steps back to the office. Alex made a copy of the old log book, thanked Jim for his time and buoyed by his small success, left the yard. While he learned nothing about where the wood had been used, he now had tangible proof his father had worked in the area. It was the assurance he desperately needed to have.

Still, the facts were contradictory. A stair like the one he sought would have been memorable for anyone who had used it, yet no one in the town he had encountered so far had that memory.

Chapter 9

Traffic was light and the journey back to the motel required little time. He locked up the car in its usual spot and instead of entering his room, returned to the main street on foot.

In the short interval that Alex had been in the town, the main street had become increasingly familiar. He wanted to quietly consider what he'd learned that afternoon and followed the same trail he'd taken on his first day. The air was hot and he sweated freely. At the crossroads the door to the main bar of the hotel beckoned and again he mounted the worn bluestone step of the entrance. A chatter of familiar voices arose from the men at their respective tables and bar stools.

"...it's a paradox is what it is." The same tartan shirt man was waving a glass of beer at the same John Deere hat wearer who was shaking his head in denial.

"No, that's not a paradox, it's just piss. Hey...mister staircase writer has come back. I'm sure he'll umpire this.

The ponytailed barman raised an empty glass from a chilled rack, made eye contact and lifted one brow in silent bar language. Alex gave a tiny nod and the glass now filled with the same ale as his first visit was placed before him. The act of a true professional. He deposited another purple note next to the glass, which was quickly replaced by a familiar mound of coins.

The tartan shirt man was talking again. "Sure it's a paradox, paradoxes are like opposites right?"

Alex saw that he was being looked at for an answer.

"Ok." He nodded. "A paradox is an idea that contradicts itself. It's two things that could both be true, but not at the same time. Like saying *nobody goes to that restaurant anymore because it's too crowded*. Does that help?" He took a sip and looked between the two for more information.

Hat wearer was first to respond. "Exactly." And leered at his tartan protagonist. You wouldn't know a paradox from a pair o' jocks."

The answer was quick to come back. "Well, it's fuckin true anyway and I think it's weird. It bothers me."

Alex added; "It'd help if I knew what the hell you were talking about."

"Orright. So if you drink a lot of water, right, then go for a piss, you piss yellow, like the colour of beer, right?" Alex nodded in agreement and he went on. "So if you come here and drink a lot of beer Right? Which is yellow, Right? But instead of pissing yellow, you piss clear. The colour of water, right? Where's the sense to that?"

An answer rose from another corner of the room that Alex couldn't see. "If my missus makes me take vitamin tablets then I get to piss *really* yellow. So if your loo has that blue shit in it, it all turns bright green. Freaked me out. Told her she could shove her dammed vitamin pills."

Another voice joined the fray. This one sounded more informed. It came from behind a newspaper at one of the tables. "It's just your kidneys you wankers. Alcohol makes you pee more than you drink, so you're just pissing out a lot of water that was already in you. It's called a diuretic."

At the next table another man with greasy hair and a wild beard simply lifted his beer in salute and said; "Cheers doc!"

With the topic apparently exhausted, nothing more was said for some moments, then the wearer of the John Deere hat cast his gaze back to Alex. "So, have you found yer staircase yet?"

"Still looking." He shrugged in acknowledgement. "I found clues, so I still think there's one around here somewhere."

"Did yer try the council?"

"Yeah. Nobody remembers anything and without names and addresses they can't do a search. At least, that's what they say."

The tartan shirt wearer had recovered enough composure to get involved again. "How old is this stair thing? I mean when was it supposed to have been built?"

"That's one fact I do have. It was right in the middle of 1985."

There was little to add to that, as nobody knew any more about it. A few more beers were sipped and fresh ones appeared on the bar.

The greasy haired man at the table raised his voice. "Big year was '85. A lot of big movies came out that year. I was workin in Coober Pedy back then, scratching for opals. The town was buzzing cos they were filming Mad Max at the time. Tina Turner was in town and they were asking for extras. Got me a part too. Lots of runnin backwards and forwards yelling."

Everyone paused to stare at the speaker and his fresh revelations. Even the barman suspended his glass polishing. "Offended me too,

they did." He added. "Said that everyone had to look rough and ratty like a nuclear war survivor and sent me to the costume department. Made me wait in a queue for arf an hour. The bloke just looked at me once, said 'you'll do' an sent me back to the set. Bastards."

This raised a general snigger of laughter, but there was more to be said. "That wasn't the worst part. The worst part was at the end o' the day when I tried go back to me digs. The security blokes would'n let me go until I gave my clothes back to the wardrobe crew. We ad a right blue about it cos I had nothin else to wear. In the end I cracked it, took me kit off where I stood and walked 'ome in me jocks."

More laughter followed. After a brief lull, conversation began to drift into fresh directions. As pleasant as this interlude was Alex could see that he was not making progress with is own cause. He finished his drink, briefly raised a hand in farewell and returned to the street. The warm air accosted his senses after the cool interior of the hotel. Looking absently in each direction, he continued along the strip.

Thoughts returned to the problem at hand. He needed to make more progress and fresh speculation was always healthy. Perhaps commercial properties and government buildings were not the best places to look. Were there larger homes in town where a wealthy landowner could commission a staircase project for themselves? Had the structure been sold or demolished shortly after its completion?

Many casual investigations fail when answers are few and despondency rises, but the pursuit of elusive knowledge was not a sensation strange to Alex. He had often been faced with a need to service unusual equipment where circuits and spares were unobtainable. Success in these situations could be both essential and impossible at the same time. His way forward was to nibble around

the fringes of a problem. If you can't resolve the big issue, then gather information and solve as many little issues as possible. Do the easiest tasks first, then the next easiest and so forth while slowly escalating efforts in the most probable direction of progress. Patterns emerge, facts accumulate and sometimes, somewhere in the middle of a mission, you just get lucky.

At the end of the main strip he crossed the street and retraced his steps from the adjacent footpath. There was no need for haste. Sometimes he just stopped to read an old town notice or stare through a window at a retail display. The country town showed its true colours by what it had to sell. Somehow, stacking tins of cattle worming paste into an elegant pyramid was deemed a more persuasive way to sell such products than by signage alone.

Just short of his motel Alex spotted the discount store, with its trays of cheap tools and gardening gloves cluttering the footpath and a '*closing down sale*' sign painted crudely on the glass facade.

From this side of the road it looked like an old movie house, but its signage above a broad veranda was faded and some letters were missing from its name. It looked like it said '*Th..and*' which made little sense, but at least the store below was still trading, even if it was just discount hardware.

It reminded him of his unresolved need to buy elastic straps for the rear tarpaulin on his car. He paused with his need in mind and decided to enter the store. It was indeed a large building, with an entrance isolated by a short hallway. As he walked the air became cool despite the lingering heat of the afternoon. The same youth he had previously seen wheeling the stock in and out, now sat bored on a stool near the checkout, idly playing with his phone in the dull

light. The sales counter was in a rough three-sided cubicle fashioned from cheap case timber.

As Alex stepped further into the building between long trays of merchandise and clothing racks, his eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom. The building was an old movie theatre. In front of him was a shallow stage with a large screen, partially curtained with dank fabric. On a side wall was a vast painted mural showing the iconic image of Marty Mcfly staring at his wristwatch while behind him a wild-eyed professor emerged from the gull-winged door of a silver Delorian. It was a promotional scene from the classic movie *Back to the Future*. Strangely, it was unfinished and some of the text and images had been outlined, but not painted in. As he panned further around he could see the front of a wide balcony that spanned the rear wall, still fitted with theatre seats. Then his gaze was rocked by a single image that drove into his mind like a spike. Rising up from behind the checkout box was a grand spiral staircase that rose a full turn and a half to meet the balcony. Its form and colour in the dim light were unmistakable.

In that moment he had no doubt that he'd found his staircase. His own words echoed unbidden to the surface of his mind.
'....sometimes you just get lucky.'

Alex returned to the checkout desk, trying to contain his excitement. The youth looked up from his text messaging annoyed by the interruption.

"I see that you have a staircase behind your cubicle here."

"Uh...yeah."

"I'm interested in these things do you mind if I take a look?"

"This building is like a historic place or sumthin. The boss doesn't want people makin around with it."

Alex could sense what was going on here. The dullard before him would be on a low hourly rate and the owner got what he paid for. He withdrew a fifty dollar note from his wallet and it rested on the glass counter between them. "Surely the boss doesn't know about everything that happens in here."

The youth looked at the money on the counter and then at Alex, then back to the money and a weak glimmer of understanding began to form. The plastic note scrunched and disappeared. "Uh ok...I guess you can have a quick look. Don't touch nuffin but."

Alex nodded and squeezed in between merchandise trays at the side of the cubicle. The temporary booth almost backed onto the bottom of the stair. Scant centimetres lay between it and the bottom tread. The close space was quite dark. Alex withdrew his phone and activated the flashlight feature which cast a wan circle of white illumination before him. From behind the cubicle he wedged his toes on the second tread of the stair from the outside, lifted one leg over the railing and dropped onto the dusty stair. Holding out the phone in front at chest height, he slowly mounted the staircase. The treads felt solid beneath his feet. The stair was wide enough for three people to tread side-by-side. It was a staggering feat of

construction. Occasionally touching the filthy handrail for support, he ascended the one and a half turns and reached the top of the stair. A section of rope was tied across the top, blocking his progress. Alex could see why. The stair was incomplete and a broad gap of flooring was missing from the space where the stair met the base of the balcony. Using his phone again, Alex captured several images of the unfinished sections.

After looking about for a few minutes, he descended the staircase, until once again he stood on the second step from the floor. Recalling the position of the nameplate of the Maryborough stair, he pressed his fingers into the gap between the checkout cubical and the first riser. He could feel the outline of some lettering, but it was indistinct. His country boy heritage had left him with an aversion to putting his hands in dusty spaces. Spooked by a mental image of redback spider nests, fingers were hastily withdrawn. Instead he slid his phone into the gap and captured several images of what he knew would be one blurry letter at a time for later analysis.

Back over the railing and squeezing again around the side of the booth, he returned to the main aisle. Here he retraced his steps near the stage and captured a few wide images of the old theatre with its stair and balcony in full view. The young shop assistant watched him suspiciously, but Alex didn't care.

He activated his phone list and placed a call direct to Tessa's mobile back in Melbourne. He didn't feel like wrestling with the sour receptionist, who liked to put everyone on hold for at least a few minutes.

"Hey Tessa. Remember me?"

"Hi, what's up? How goes the search?"

"You'll never guess what I am looking at right now." With that, Alex pressed 'send' on his most recent image of the staircase and balcony.

There was a pause while the image transferred, then a gasp. "Oh... wow. You found it! Where are you now?"

"I'd been searching the town since I arrived here, but the whole time it was only two doors away from my motel. I'm in an old theatre building that's temporarily being used as a discount store. It's bizarre. For some reason the stair was never finished and it's been sealed up for years, so nobody here really knows about it."

Tessa could sense his excitement with this discovery. "The *name*. Did you find a name at the bottom?"

"Yes, but I don't know what it is yet. It's partially covered up. I'll work it out soon and call you back."

Alex cleared the call. For the first time since taking on this mission, he felt he was making some real progress. His elation was real.

Back in the motel room Alex transferred the phone files to his portable computer and imported the nameplate pictures into his favourite image manipulation software.

He could see that the first letter was a fuzzy 'K'. Using this as a reference the next three pictures were overlapped until a full name was discernable.

The name resolved on the screen before him. He was now looking for a girl of thirty years ago whose name was '*Karen*'.

Chapter 10

Alex had learned some important things since his discovery of the previous day. According to the shop assistant, the theatre was owned by the shire and had been empty for a very long time. A few months ago it was leased as a retail outlet for a fixed period, provided the vendor made no changes to its façade or interior spaces. The youth had been hired to sell the cheap merchandise with passing trade. Alex now must trace the building ownership back until it revealed who the woman *Karen* was and see if she could be found. He knew that there was one person who would be willing to help. He connected up his portable laser printer and reproduced a couple of still images of the stair before returning to the car.

The erect 'OPEN' sandwich board was still in front of the museum. Alex mounted the steps and was pleased to see Clive perched

behind his counter. A middle aged couple browsed the exhibits and slowly moved between the available rooms.

"Ahh...My stair chaser has returned. So soon? Have you found anything good yet?"

Alex extracted the printed pictures from a manila folder and slid them across the counter.

"My oh My." The old curator was genuinely surprised. "Isn't that something. The old cinema, *The Grand*. I recognised it immediately. I'd cast many a popcorn missile from that balcony in my youth, but this..." He tapped the image of the stair. "This I have never seen before. There used to be a rickety old staircase that went up the outside of the building. It was the only way to reach the dress circle level." He leaned back on his stool and briefly closed his eyes in reflection.

"It used to be run by a fellow called Nat?... No, Nate. Nate Marlowe. He was also the projectionist. We'd try to sneak in after the movies had started and he would count heads to check the numbers and then try to throw us out. The old stair was pretty dodgy. I remember they condemned it and eventually pulled it down. It was about that time the theatre closed and it was never opened again. I think it was a big story at the time. The whole town was disappointed it had lost its only cinema. I suppose that this new stair must have been some kind of attempt to get the cinema reopened, but I don't think it ever happened."

Alex tried, but the image of a corruptible young Clive stealing his way into a cinema wouldn't quite gel. It was too far from the gentleman who sat before him. "I would like to find out as much as I can about this Nate Marlowe. The staircase gave me a valuable clue. I learned that my father had known a girl called *Karen* while it was being built. I'm hoping that this Nate fellow will know something about them."

"You can always go and ask him yourself. At least I think you can. I recall seeing him in a wheelchair last year, being lifted into a minibus after our street parade. It was from the *Golden Hills* nursing home. He ought to be there still, but I wouldn't want to go near that place as perhaps they wouldn't let me out again." He barked a chuckle at his own joke.

Alex was delighted by this gem of local knowledge. He shook hands with Clive again, thanked him earnestly and promised to pursue this new lead.

Clive flippantly added: "Let me know how you get on. This staircase is a chunk of history that the people of our town will want to know about. I'll try to shake loose some more information from my end. This could be quite a big deal for us."

Alex made a promise to compare notes again in the near future and departed.

Chapter 11

The *Golden Hills Nursing Home* was easy to find. Barely a kilometre from the town centre, it was a rambling property of angular rooflines that looked like it had seen several extensions – each one the product of a different architect. The complex was ringed by mature salmon gums, their lustrous copper coloured trunks heavily ringed with bark litter. A formal entrance opened onto the apex of a roadway loop, giving easy access to visitors and patrons with mobility problems. Alex drove past this and slid into one of the visitor bays on its far side then walked back to the entrance.

Thick glass doors slid apart as he approached. Discreet signs just inside the doors informed visitors that they couldn't leave again without an access code for a keypad. The foyer was stark, blandly carpeted and empty except for a few low slung vinyl chairs and plastic plants. In one wall a window to a reception office beckoned. Between a pair of fake palms it offered a narrow counter with a chromed attention bell and some empty brochure racks.

Alex made himself known to a business-like nurse on the other side of the counter and asked about the possibility of visiting a Mister Marlowe.

"Yes, I suppose that would be ok, if he wants to." She glanced at the clock. "Nate should be in the TV room about this time. Sign the visitor book here, then let's go for a walk and we'll find out."

Relieved that his contact was still in the land of the living, Alex followed the nurse up shallow corridor ramps and deeper into a beige coloured labyrinth. The hallway opened into a well lit lounge

where a few elderly people in scattered chairs and wheelchairs watched a black & white movie on a large plasma screen.

The nurse walked to one of the wheelchairs, moved to where she could be seen and spoke loudly. “Nate, there is someone here to see you.” The man in the chair turned his head to look at Alex and said gruffly, “I don’t know you.” then waved a hand. “Never mind, talking to someone new is better than watching this fucking crap for the tenth time.”

“Now Nate, you know it upsets the ladies when you use bad language.”

A woman in the wheelchair next to him added; “Damn Straight you old fart!” She had been at work on a pencil sketch in a notepad with hands badly distorted by arthritis. Alex noticed that it was a surprisingly good rendition of people in chairs watching a television.

“That’s enough Maggie.” The nurse added, trying to keep the peace. She steadily pushed Nate’s chair into an adjacent sunroom. Alex lifted a regular chair from a row of several pressed against a wall and positioned it directly in front of Nate’s wheelchair. He saw a shrunken man with wisps of white hair that did him little good. Once he would have been large, probably athletic, but now wore a fixed scowl that showed a man who had watched his own vitality ebb over many years and radiated a barely concealed bitterness. He spoke gruffly. “So, tell me again, who’re you?”

Alex began with informal chatter. “Thanks for seeing me mister Marlowe. Yes, we haven’t met before. I’m Alex Kingbridge, which probably means nothing to you, but I think you may have met my father. *Ben Caslow.*”

His eyes widened in surprise and the old man leaned back in his chair. "Well, there's a name I haven't heard in a while." He gazed at Alex more closely. "I suppose you could look a bit like him."

"Unfortunately he died about fifteen years ago. I never got a chance to meet him."

"Well I got to know him pretty good, at least for a while."

Alex felt a rising elation. For the first time in his life he was having a conversation with someone who knew his father. His own reaction surprised him a little, as his missing heritage had always seemed trivial. Now it was important to stay focused and gain as much as he could from this encounter. "I believe he came to town to build a staircase for you, but I don't know much about it and I'm trying to find out. I was born in Maryborough Victoria, probably about the same time as he worked for you."

Nate laughed out loud, "Ha, the randy bugger certainly liked his girls. I didn't know what he'd been up to before I'd met him. I liked Ben. He had style and was a hard worker. He had a good thing going in town too before it all got fucked up at the end." He looked up at Alex. "I missed him when he left."

"That's what I want to find out about. I don't know the story and I'd like you to tell me about it."

"Yeah, ok." He pointed to an urn and coffee makings on a side table. "Fetch me a cuppa and one for yourself. A bloke could fuckin die o' thirst in this place."

Alex returned with refreshments. Nate lifted his cup, sipped, grunted in reluctant approval and returned it to the saucer. He looked sharply at Alex. "Since you've found me you must already know I used to run the cinema in town a long time back. That's where I met Ben."

"I'd been running the show for about ten years. It struggled along, but we survived. Used to employ a few of the local girls too, selling tickets and lollies. Nice looking ones would always boost sales at the snack bar, so I'd give bonuses to girls who made an effort to look sharp. The building goes back about forty years before my time. It was a grand old place, but showed signs of wear. The dress circle seats were the most popular. All the kids would collect their tickets then take the side door to the outside stairs that reached the balcony. The stair was old and bounced badly when people walked on it. Some cracks in the frame started to appear and we got complaints. Then someone dobbed us in and we were shut down. They told us we couldn't just rebuild em. Something about the stair having been built on the title of the land next door. I guess when the building went up it was just a cow paddock and nobody cared. Anyway, the bloody stairs were condemned and we were told that we had to have new stairs to reach the balcony inside before we could reopen. This was a real bitch as I was already running a big bank loan. Back then bank interest was topping out at about sixteen percent. I was double-fucked."

Alex could see that even now, he was upset about this.

"It was a big problem for me cos a regular staircase would never make it to the balcony. There wasn't enough room for one. The driver who delivered our films said he'd recently seen a fancy spiral

stair down in Victoria that could solve the problem and gave me a name. So I contacted this guy Ben. Your old man, and talked him into coming up and building a stair for me." He paused for another sip from his cup. "You gotta realise how screwed I was. I had to make repayments, but I wasn't allowed to show movies until the place was fixed up. I made a deal with the bank. They would advance cash in instalments for the new stair, but it has to be up in just five months. Ben wanted six months, but figured that if we pushed it and did the final coats of lacquer after we reopened, he could squeeze it in, so we went for it."

"Well, he worked bloody hard, took his instalments, but he knew there'd be the big final payment at the end. The girls I hired for the ticketing had no work and I couldn't pay them, but they had nothing else to do, so they'd come back and watch the construction. Sometimes they'd help out a bit, just for something to do. Ben was a bloody worker I'll tell you. He'd have his shirt off and did everything by hand. Sawing, winching, the lot. Looked like a bleedin body-builder. That probably attracted the girls a bit too."

Alex felt it was the right time to comment. "I found a name chiselled at the bottom of the stair. It said *Karen*."

Nate sighed heavily. "Yeah, Karen. She was one of my girls. She took a real shining to him. Made lunches for him, hung around a lot. Sometimes we'd screen movies on the quiet, unofficial like, and they'd be sitting together. I think they made plans. The project looked like it would all work out."

"Something happened?"

He scowled and straightened some creases in his pants with the palms of his hands; recalling a past experience with distaste. Our bank manager got crook and they sent in a new one. The new guy was an asshole trying to make a big name for himself. He said we were carrying too much debt. Said we had no equity left and shut everything down with about a month of construction left to go." He huffed again. "It made no sense at all cos he got nuthin, but this new guy was out to scare other loan holders and make an example out 'o me."

"Well, that was it. I was rooted. I had no cinema, no way of earning it back and Ben was left without his final instalment. That was his profit. God knows he earned it. Ben had nothing left but his tools. He said he always dedicated his jobs to someone special and was going to do it when we re-opened. That was never going to happen. On the last night, he chiselled Karen's name into the bottom step, collected his tools and disappeared. Karen was shattered. The next day the bank fitted their own locks on the doors and I never went in there again. It was a bad time for everyone and an utter waste. The bank got an empty building that nobody was interested in and we all lost our jobs, so the town didn't have a cinema any more. VHS movies became the big thing back then, but I hated em. No sense of occasion. Who dresses up and takes somebody special out for the night just to watch a bloody video tape?"

"What did you do then?"

"Eventually I did accounting and admin work for a local car dealer. I didn't like it either, but I hated not having money for food even more. Twelve years later I retired and that was my lot."

"Do you remember Karen's full name?"

"Yeah. She was a Mayville. Karen Mayville. Why do you need to know?"

Alex was careful with his words here. "My father left some money in a will. I'm not sure why. Maybe it is guilt for how he left, or regrets for some kind of future they might have had. I don't really know. Regardless, he wanted to pass something onto Karen and I've been asked to find her."

"Yeah, well, you're a bit late." He looked down at his hands and fidgeted. "About a year after the cinema went belly-up, she married a bloke called Merv Stinson. I remember that name because he was a prick and a pisthead. A violent drunk if you know what I mean. Well, a couple of years later, he was coming home from the pub, wasted as usual. He ran off the road in heavy rain, dropped into a creek bed that had filled up and drowns im'self. Sort of natural selection, where dickheads remove themselves from the gene pool right? There weren't many tears shed at that funeral.

They never had kids. A little later, Karen left town and I never heard anything about her again."

He looked up at Alex again with a fresh thought. "Ben died fifteen years ago you say. Ain't you leaving your run a bit late?"

"Yeah, it's true. There's a Melbourne law firm that was supposed to organise all of this a long time ago, but pretty much ignored the job until recently."

"When Ben Caslow left Maryborough to come here, he gave my mother more than a simple goodbye. I was born about eight months

later. Unfortunately my mother died while I was just a baby. I heard Ben's name for the first time just a few weeks ago, so I'm fairly sure he never knew about me."

He grunted. "I have no doubt about that. Ben was an extraordinary bloke. He could build complex shapes from wood without ever having to look at a diagram. He was a gentleman flirt with every girl he met, but he could never quite know when to stop digging a hole with promises that he couldn't keep. Oh, he wouldn't do it on purpose. He'd try real hard to make everyone happy, but it's like stacking coins. It doesn't matter how neatly you stack em, when the pile gets high enough it's always going to end badly." He coughed terribly and took a long sip from his cup.

"Y'know, I'm real glad you came here today. Sure' I'm still pissed about what happened to my cinema back then. It got me all twisted for a long time. Probably I'd just watched too many movies where the good guys took big risks and got rich in the end. I took bloody risks too and just got shafted by the bank. No happy ending for Nate."

He leaned forward in his chair and spoke quietly and in earnest. "So young fella, that's what you gotta do. It's alright to think big, but you gotta make sure your arse is covered first, or that bloody bank will be breathing heavy on the back of ya neck and ya fucked!" He made a fist and rammed it in the air for emphasis, then dropped back in his chair, pleased at having delivered an essential gem of advice to someone new.

Alex nodded placatingly. "I know what you mean mister Marlowe. I'm not much of a risk taker. I decided a long time ago that all dogs bite, all horses kick and banks don't exist just to be my friend. I'm not going to get too close to any of them."

He returned his own cup to the saucer, stood up and shook hands. "It's been nice to talk to you today mister Marlowe. Now I'm going to keep looking for Karen Mayville, but if it's ok, I'd like to come back another time and talk some more."

The old man seemed to relax. "If you do, make sure you'd be callin me 'Nate'. You just wait there a moment young'un. I'm gonna fetch you something." With practised skill, he twirled the chair around and disappeared into the hallway. Evidently he didn't really need to be pushed around by others, but let them do it when it suited him.

Alex amused himself by peering at a few old black & white prints on the walls showing, early bullock teams working rutted roads. It was probably part of a historic collection of the region.

About three minutes passed and Nate returned in the wheelchair with a small manila envelope in his lap.

"Here yer go young'un. You can have this." He offered the envelope. "When I'm done, somebody'll probably chuck it out anyhow."

Alex accepted the envelope, lifted an unsealed end and withdrew a faded colour photo. It showed the inside of the cinema with some visible rows of seats. A half built staircase rose behind them. On the second step was a partially shaded view of a moustached man wearing a tool belt. A younger girl stood one step higher, with her

arm looping through his. To the left of the photo there was a sketched outline of an unpainted 'Back to the future' mural, still in its early stages. A middle aged woman with long hair stood next to it, facing away from the camera. She held a clip board and was working on the outline with a marker.

"That's Ben right there." Nate tapped the image of the man on the stair. "Next to him, that'd be the girl you're looking for. Karen."

"Who's the woman on the left?"

"That's Maggie our resident artist. She's been doing picture work around the town her whole life. You probably saw her here in the TV room. In this town if you don't die and you don't move somewhere else, eventually you show up here. We had a thing going once, a long time ago. Now she just sits in her chair and tries to annoy me with her sketches and I get to annoy her back with my cussin. That's what old friends do right?"

"So that big *Back to the future* mural was hers then?"

"Yeah, she never finished it when we went bust and she's still pretty pissed about that."

Alex looked back to the image of his father and the young Karen by his side, slid it back into the envelope and looked up to the man beside him with fresh respect. With a pang of gratitude Alex shook his hand a second time. "Thank you so much Nate. This is the first picture I've seen of my father. It means a lot to me."

Farewells were given and Alex left the centre. He placed the image on the passenger seat and kept stealing glances at it as he drove back to the motel.

Chapter 12

In the past hour it had grown dark outside. Sitting in his chair Alex faced his computer screen, but didn't look at it. Instead his gaze kept reverting to the old print of the stair with his father wedged in the top row of buttons on his keyboard.

A swirl of emotions looped through his mind. The mission he'd accepted was not an easy one. He'd pursued the hard questions, but the answers, when he found them, were only half-answers that generated new questions. Was this real progress? The mission was to find the woman that his father had spent time with some thirty years ago. He had learned many things, but not where the woman was. Instead he was learning more about the man that was his father. Respect and mistrust were neck-and-neck, but the race still had a ways to run. It was easy to speculate about the man. Why he did the things he had done and what had driven him away so easily. The practical side of his mind was telling him not to guess at things he didn't know, but just stick to the facts. The silence in the room was broken by a ringtone. His phone flashed Tessa's name, which he decided was a voice he'd like to hear about now and took the call.

"Hi" was his simple response.

"Hi Alex. I'm checking up on you. Any progress since the staircase find?"

Alex detailed his encounter at the nursing home and soon reached the new revelation. "Karen Mayville or Karen Stinson. This is who we're looking for. I don't know if she's alive or whether she's changed names again. I've made some regular searches, but all I find are a million 'facebook' Karens and no useful references to Mayville's or Stinsons."

"That's fine. This is a very important development. 'Karen' was just a name, there's no substance to a single name, but with a second name she's suddenly a real person. Real people can be traced. Let me work it a bit from this end. We've got access to electoral rolls and a few other databases that you're not likely to access yourself. Maybe we can turn something up. ...You sound a bit different tonight. Is everything else ok?"

"Tessa, I have a photo of him. A picture of my father and Karen together on his staircase. I know what he looks like now. He's more than a name in a folder I'm finding stuff out and I'm not sure where it'll take me, or if I'll like what I find."

"Don't let it get to you. You're doing great on this, but you need to remember that everything that worries you already happened a long time ago. We can't change his life, but we can keep filling in the gaps about him. So keep plugging away for a bit more. Someone must know something about Karen. We always knew that it was going to take more than internet searching to sort this out. We need you there to keep digging Alex."

"It's ok, I'm not freaking out, but it is a little bit weird. I'm wondering around a town trailing a man who was here thirty years ago. He walked the same streets and probably drank at the same places I've been today. I need to be doing this. Does that make any sense?"

Anne was at her home apartment in Melbourne. City lights filled the night sky through her kitchen window on the fourth floor. She had a cordless phone to her ear and half a glass of red by her side, perched on a tall stool next to an immaculate dark-granite benchtop.

"Alex, it makes a lot of sense. If it didn't, then I'd say we had the wrong guy for the job and I know that's not the case. Give me a bit of time to work on this and we'll compare notes again in the morning."

"Thanks Tessa. It's great to talk to someone who knows what I'm up against here. We'll catch up tomorrow then."

They cleared the call. Alex turned away from his screen and stretched out on the bed with his back propped on pillows. Picking up the TV remote, he began surfing for a cable program worthy of being a distraction.

In Melbourne, Tessa returned the phone to its charger cradle, stared thoughtfully at the black window for a few minutes, then took her glass of wine to her computer and began to type.

Chapter 13

The next morning Alex slept late. He'd been dimly aware of a series of car door slams as many of the nearby motel rooms were vacated by the overnight guests, but now it had been quiet for a while. There was a chatter of voices outside his door as the two women on staff were trundling around their make-up trolley. He could faintly hear them working in the room next to his. No doubt laying out the baby soaps, folding fresh points on the toilet rolls and probably fitting the dunny lid with a fresh strip of paper to protect the next guests from unspecified dangers. As these thoughts slowly coalesced into solid ideas, he knew he was now awake.

Alex climbed out of bed and peered through a chink in the curtains. Apart from his own, there were only a few vehicles remaining in the many parking spaces. After a shower he felt good and the world outside his room was calling. Looking at the loaf of sliced bread next to the toaster, he decided he could do better. The words *Eggs Benedict* rose unbidden in his mind, as did the memory of a café a scant block away that could treat this desire.

On the footpath the walk took him past the old cinema. The cheap stock out the front was absent and 'closed down' was freshly painted on the window. One of the double doors into the building was partially open. Alex paused and could hear voices from within. Feeling like he had a stake in this, he pushed the door open wider and entered. Once again his eyes adjusted to the apparent gloom, even though a few of the suspended house lights had been activated.

Two people stood at the base of the stair. Their voices were familiar. Clive of the museum and his friend Bernard turned and immediately recognised their new arrival.

"Ah, Alex. Good morning. You have arrived at a propitious moment."

Alex thought that only Clive could use a word like propitious in a sentence and make it sound normal. He was in a variation of his usual meticulous garb, but the bow tie was an even brighter red. Bernard appeared to be wearing the same clothes of their last encounter. The trays of cheap hardware had gone and strips of packaging and paper waste littered the floor. The tenuous shell of plywood checkout booth had been cast to one side and the base of the stairway behind it was now fully exposed.

Clive's voice had a distinct echo from the cavernous room around them. "As a part of my Museum work, I'm on the board that administers listed buildings in our region. When I found that this building was on the list, I had to see for myself what you'd found. What a magnificent edifice that you have brought to my attention! Yet again, I thank you sincerely. I asked Bernard nicely to accompany me this morning."

"Just bloody well try to keep me away." Bernard added. "it's the best staircase out of native timber that I've seen." He produced a high-power led hand light and shone it up the staircase. Without any conscious decision having been made, the trio began the ascent. Alex's thoughts of breakfast having been cast to one side as they climbed the dusty spiral into the gloom.

At the top they encountered the same tape barrier that had ended Alex's last visit. The strong light revealed a three metre gap in the flooring and balustrade. Broad bearers bridged the gap. Without hesitation Bernard snapped the barrier tape. With his arms wide for balance, he walked the centre bearer across the emptiness below. Once at the far side, he found some dusty scaffolding planks that lay on the floor and slid them back across the void to establish a wider path. Scant moments later, they all stood on the balcony itself. There were twenty rows of seats, separated into thirds by two broad stairs. The scintillating beam of the hand-light panned around the rear of the balcony and paused at four offset holes in the back wall. It also revealed a door at the top of one of the stairs.

"I remember this part like yesterday" Clive announced. "That's the Bio Box. Nowdays they just call them projection rooms, but when I was a kid, they were always '*Bio Boxes*'." He explained. "Comes from the original name of the film projector called a 'Biograph'." They ascended the dusty stair to the door. The handle didn't turn. Alex peered at the lock. It was a simple affair with a Tee-handle. From his wallet he withdrew a small ground allen key and a fragment of hacksaw blade and slid the end of both into different parts of the keyhole.

"So, you do this a lot where you come from then?" Asked Bernard, as he held the light source steady.

"On farms there's an awful lot of electrical cupboards and machinery hatches that don't have keys anymore. If I didn't get good at this, I wouldn't have had a job." He kept one tool steady while jiggling the other. Seconds later the barrel turned, followed by the tee-handle

itself and the door was pulled open. Bernard located a wall switch and the room was bathed in dust affected yellow light from a pair of naked bulbs that dangled just above head height. A box of rags could be seen on the floor. Bernard seized one of these and turned the lights back off again. By torchlight he gave each of the dangling globes a quick polish and restored the power once more. This action made the lamps significantly brighter,

The room was long, with two large shapes covered in sheets perched in front of the projection holes. Alex lifted one corner and revealed a pristine projector in a clay coloured finish. At the rear of the room were racks something similar to what one would see in a bakery. Most shelves were empty but a few still contained large metal canisters, also dull with dust. Bernard focused his lamp on these and looked closer at the handwritten labels.

"There's some classics here." Alex read; "Fletch, Witness, Pale Rider, Weird Science. These are all from 1985."

On one shelf lay a brown leather case with reinforced corners. Clive popped the catches and slid out some canisters. "These ones are still sealed. I don't think they've been opened before. What would 'BTTF' be?"

Alex knew the answer. "With the unfinished mural downstairs, it has to be the '*Back to the Future*' movie they had planned to reopen with. Nate had said never got to show it before the bank sealed the building."

Bernard rased an interesting question. "So, who owns this lot now? The distributors never got them back when the building was sealed"

Clive ventured; "That's difficult to say. Movies have a strong copyright protection and they are only ever rented, so my best answer is that I have no idea. We probably need advice from a big city lawyer."

Alex offered, "I know someone who may qualify for that. Who owns this place? It may make a difference."

"I've already researched that." Clive responded. "When the bank took possession of the building they found themselves with a white elephant that nobody was interested in owning. This part of the town was pretty run down and land here had little value. After another ten years of inactivity the outstanding council rates exceeded the paper value of the building and it was appropriated from the bank by the shire. They were probably happy to be rid of it. The front façade was designated an 'item of historic interest' which prevented its demolition. While it's still council owned, it comes under the administration of the Board of the Historic Reserve Trust, of which I am proud to be Secretary. In this region there are a few hundred buildings on our lists, but nobody's given any thought to this one in a very long time. Six months ago it was leased out to a local retailer who wanted a big space, for a short term and that time has just passed."

"Alex fished around in his wallet and located a dog-eared business card from Tessa's law firm and handed it to Clive. Give this lady a call about these films. She may not know the answer directly, but it's

likely that she can find something out about the ownership status of these movies."

Reverently, they returned the films to the case and retraced their steps from the room to the edge of the balcony. The three men again looked at the unfinished chasm bridged by the scaffolding.

Here, Clive was the first to speak. "It would be a crime not to complete the project."

Bernard nodded in agreement. "Yeah, but it won't be easy. The timber will have to match perfectly or it will never blend with the original work here. I can see that there's some pretty special wood to go into it and there's nothing here to work with. We'll have problems getting this stuff again. It's like gold."

The conversation lapsed into silence for a few moments until Alex intervened. "Bernard, do you know Roaches? The timber yard?"

"Sure, I use them when I have to, but they're a bit dear."

Alex continued. "Well, go and pay them a visit today. Tell them you're finishing a staircase then tell them I said that they'd look after you."

Bernard shone the torch on Alex and stared quizzically at him, but his face contained a cryptic smile and he could not be persuaded to

say more. They crossed the flooring gap again and made their way back down to the ground level foyer.

"Well gents, it has been a fun morning, but I'm late for breakfast and I'd better make a move before they swap menus, so I'll leave you with it." Alex shook their hands and made his way to the main entrance, squinting at the bright light on the other side.

Alex need not have worried about the hour when breakfasts at the café timed out, as they touted an all-day breakfast menu. He was pleased to take his eggs to an outside table with a pot of tea and a newspaper and quietly watch the passing trade on what remained of this sparkling morning.

Traffic on both the road and footpath were light. He noticed that the movements of the few who were getting around were uniformly slow and leisurely. The pace of life in this town he decided had much to commend it.

He withdrew his phone from a jacket pocket and called Tessa. Perhaps there had been some progress with her search for the elusive Karen.

"I'm glad you called Alex, I wasn't far from calling you anyway. I've had a busy morning."

"Well, I've had the opposite of that I'm pleased to say." He went on to describe his encounter with the two locals at the old theatre

building, including the reels of film they had discovered.

"What's your take on this find? Who owns abandoned property like that?"

"That's a really tricky question because there's a lot more to it than 'finders keepers' even if it's been there a long time. We have a specialist guy here on property law and I'll bend his ear a bit later. Regardless, I've got a bit more important news for you on our identity search. It's not a dead-end, but it's a scary development. I hope you're sitting down."

Alex never liked a forewarning of bad news. "Sure. Go ahead."

"I found your Karen Stinson after she left West Wyalong ok. Electoral roles showed she moved to a Sydney suburb for the next twelve years, then disappeared again. I found a news report from 2002 where she and two other girlfriends from Wanaka in New Zealand were holidaying in Bali. She was there when the nightclub was blown up by terrorist attacks where over two hundred were killed. One of her friends Olivia, was a fatality. The report said that the other friend Mia, lost an arm and Karen suffered some unspecified facial injuries but survived. After she returned to Australia she disappeared. I found a vague reference that she may have gone to New Zealand with her surviving friend to dodge the publicity here. It was a very big story at the time. I spent some time looking for a contact name or address for the friend in Wanaka, but drew a blank. Alex, I want you to follow this. I want you to go to New Zealand to pick up the trail again."

Alex said nothing for a few moments. He was thinking how very different the future would have been for this young woman had the town bank not taken the action it did thirty years before. He remembered feeling the same anger as everyone else back in 2002 over the innocent people whose lives were destroyed in that blast. Today the anger still moved him. Now, more than ever, he was determined to fulfil his father's wish for this woman. He pictured again the young girl in the photograph next to his father.

"Ok Tessa, I'm on it. Email what you have on her and I'll make a move tomorrow."

"Alex, I've been upset about this all morning. I keep thinking of some of the overseas holidays I've taken in that part of the world. It just as easily could have happened to me. I'm not sure how to put this, but.... Really, thanks."

Chapter 14

On those rare occasions that necessitated overseas travel, Alex preferred to take his flights from Melbourne. With West Wyalong as his temporary base, Sydney was a better choice, even though the fly time to New Zealand would be about the same.

Alex felt that West Wyalong still had secrets to tell, but for now the trail he had to follow pulled in a different direction. After he carried

his tools into the room and stacked them on the floor, the next task was to park the car at the rear of the motel. He hoped that the cling wrap on the passenger window was still a slight deterrent to a would-be car thief, although he mused, the biggest deterrent was that almost all other cars in the area were more attractive than his.

He travelled light with just a few essentials in a pack. The train ride to Sydney was long, but easygoing. Country rail always had a different flavour to the sterile metropolitan trains. It gave him time to plan and prepare in ways that couldn't be done while driving. The flight from Sydney left very late at night, but departed on schedule. Comfortably airborne over the Tasman Sea, the jet headed East at high altitude into an accelerated dawn and Alex thoroughly enjoyed the ride. It was a direct flight to Queenstown on the South island, a route patronised almost entirely by snow skiers. This suited him, as there were plenty of car hire choices in the town and Wanaka was supposed to be only a few hours drive away.

He hadn't been to New Zealand before and was unprepared for the vast beauty of snow capped mountains and blue lakes revealed on the dawn of the following morning. As the plane spiralled down to Queenstown, the mountains reared up on both sides of a broad valley. Although it was still early by local time he could see lines of cars snaking up the hills from the town centre to the ski fields, ready for the daily rush.

On the vast Lake Wakatipu, adjacent to the town, he caught a glimpse of the ancient steamship he'd read about, as it approached the Queenstown jetty. It had a long wake behind it and a dense spiral of coal smoke rising from its single red funnel. Then he was down and the jet slowly trundled to its designated spot at the terminal.

Alex was one of the first to leave the customs area as practically everyone else went straight to the carousel to collect their ski's and snowboards.

A compact car with chains in the boot and GPS on the dashboard had been readied for him. After a stern lecture from a young car hire girl on which roads he could and could not drive on, Alex was out of the terminal and almost immediately plying the narrow roads between green fields. He'd been unprepared for the piercing chill in the air and cranked the heater high and resolved to buy a better jacket in Wanaka.

As the road zig-zaged its way up the foothills the fields gradually vanished under a blanket of snow, broken only by the clear but perpetually wet bitumen road. Trees were entirely absent and the world turned into a stark land of black and white. Only the occasional yellow sign of an approaching bend assured him that his vision was still normal. The contrast from recent days in outback New South Wales was total and the winding drive through the vee of two snow covered mountains was the most spectacular in his experience.

It was a long drive, snow continued to blanket both sides of the road. The sky threatened more of the same weather that had been dumping snow over the South Island for the past few days, but at present it was quite still. The road straightened out and more houses could be seen. A short time later it came to an end on an esplanade along the edge of Lake Wanaka. Alex was a little weary as it had been a long journey and relished finding somewhere to stay soon.

Initial concern turned to dismay as every one of the plentiful motels had a 'No Vacancy' sign out the front. It should have occurred to him that accommodation would be tight at peak season, but he was used to winging his travel with blind optimism. After trawling the streets of the town multiple times he had reached a sour conclusion that he could be facing a frozen night in the car. Driving past yet another no vacancy motel he briefly glanced up the driveway and saw something that took a moment to gel. He reversed back and stopped across the driveway entrance. Alex could see two people loading bags into the boot of a car, one was supported on crutches. In a ski holiday town a man on crutches usually meant he'd come a cropper on the snow. The same person putting bags into a car could signal an early departure to a holiday. He pulled over and made his way to the reception area. Snow crunched under his feet and he walked carefully. The frigid air highlighted the fact that this really wasn't a good time of year to be sleeping in a car.

A smiling middle-aged woman at the counter lifted her head above a computer screen and asked if she could be of assistance.

"I noticed an injured guest in the car park. Could it be that he's going home early?"

"Yes, it's a bit sad. A young couple came down for a two week stay but the husband had a spectacular prang up the peak on the second day, then spent the next two days in hospital. Now he says he's had enough and isn't going to sit around watching everyone else have a good time."

Alex visibly brightened at the man's misfortune. "Would I be right in thinking you could now have an unscheduled vacancy here?"

"Well, yes. I guess it does. However it's one of our dearer suites and you may find it a bit expensive if it's only for you."

He withdrew a plastic card from his wallet and slid it on the counter towards the woman. "I'm pretty confident we can come to an arrangement of sorts."

Alex secured the room one third off the regular rate, but was told to return in an hour as the room still needed to be made up. To this he nodded then victoriously drove his hire car to the town centre for some supplies and a look round.

Although he was quite used to the occasional Kiwi accent in Australia, it felt a little different to be surrounded by lots of these voices. As Wanaka is a holiday town frequented by lots of Aussies, he was pretty confident that his own accent wouldn't sound too much out of place. While shopping he procured an excellent jacket, a woollen hat and light waterproof boots. His own summer wear shoes were quite unsuitable for walking in the frozen slush that prevailed over much of the town.

At a supermarket he collected some drinks and snacks to take back to the room. The woman at the checkout was middle aged and he observed that if the accent was anything to go by, she'd been around the town for a while, for when she passed potato chips over the checkout scanner, she asked if he wanted his 'thun chups' in a

separate bag. Alex nodded and thought that this was as good a time as any to launch his enquiry.

"Hi, I was told that while I was in town that I should look up a mutual friend, but I don't know where she lives. Her name is Mia. Mia Albright. Would you have come across anyone of that name?"

She looked quite bored at this question and responded with a thick: "Your frund's got one of the most common names in the country. There are plunty of Mia's round hur."

"Perhaps you would remember her, as she only has one arm."

A shake of the head was the only answer and she returned her focus to the till.

Alex collected his purchases and made his way back to the motel room. This could be a very short search if nobody in the town had heard of either of the two women. Tessa had already tried some conventional searches at her end, but the name of Albright didn't appear in the local phone directory.

The room was excellent. It was warm and modern, with two bedrooms and a small kitchen area that would be very useful. The lounge area had an enormous flat-screen TV screwed to the wall. Alex activated the remote and found that there were only three stations to choose from. Being evening prime-time, perhaps there were some interesting programs being aired. He found a rugby match, a sheep dog trial and a re-run of a Family Guy animation. Alex returned to the sheep dog channel and glumly watched dog

after dog deftly moving sheep in and out of pens. At least they were doing it quietly.

Chapter 15

The next few days passed rapidly with little to show for his work. The weather had been uniformly foul, prompting most of the skiers to stay away from the ski fields and stick to the town. Each morning there was fresh snow on the roof of the hire car and the council graders struggled to keep the roads clear. The days were slow to get going and darkness descended exceptionally early. Alex initially focused on shops he felt would be frequented by locals, deliberately dodging the stores that dealt mostly with the transient tourist populations. There were no sparks of recognition to any of the names that he sought. This was discouraging as the news articles sent from Tessa had been quite specific in saying the two women had returned to Wanaka. He expanded his search to the nearby town of Lake Hawea just to make sure, but the result was the same.

At the end of each day Alex routinely made a call to Tessa to compare notes, but it never took long to convey negative results. He found he looked forward to their conversations as he didn't relate well to the people he encountered in the town. Mostly they were all focused on skiing and drinking, or talking about skiing while drinking, neither of which he was passionate about. He braved a few visits to bars in hotels and other night venues, which he found uncomfortably loud and thick with skiers, most of whom were quite young. In the absence of good skiing they just seemed intent on getting drunk as quickly as possible. They paid high prices for sweet blends of energy drinks and strong spirits, then threw up in

the snow on the way to their rooms. It's not that Alex had outgrown this behaviour, its just that he never started in the first place.

Here, he felt more like an observer than a participant and it had become a surreal experience. He witnessed a repetitive Groundhog day of visitors and residents getting up, milling about for a few hours and returning to their warm little rooms again at night. Tonight he had donned his woollen hat, gloves and warm coat, then ventured out for a walk along the foreshore. An assortment of small boats were tied up to a train of floating jetties. Their white hulls glowed in the dark by the wan security lights. In this vast lake the water became very deep, very quickly and wasn't suitable for fixed moorings. He stopped and pondered over a broad sign that announced he was looking at 'Lake Wanaka', which seemed patently obvious as it was the only lake around.

Lake Wanaka. What if he was looking at this the wrong way. The news article about Karen and her friend had referred simply to 'Wanaka', but what if the details had been corrupted and the real destination had been *Lake Wanaka*, or rather a home somewhere *by* the lake? It could be anywhere in this vast lakes system, but it was a clue. He remembered the maxim that if you don't like the answers you get, then ask different questions. A stiff wind blew across the water and chilled his bones. He retraced his steps back to the room and settled in for the remainder of the night.

In the morning the thought stayed with him and Alex returned to his car to pursue a fresh avenue. His focus had shifted from shops in the town itself to enterprises that served the entire region. One resource that locals could not avoid was the need for heating fuel. All properties in the region needed refills for their gas bottles, not

just the town centres. Perhaps staff at the gas depot would know a bit more about those who lived beyond the town limits.

It was easy enough to find. On the Southern outskirts of the town there was a depot with an office, a loading bay and a series of vented storage sheds for full and empty gas bottles. Alex parked his car outside the main office. He banged the slush from his boots on a steel grating and entered a very warm room. Evidently, they used a lot of their own product. As he approached the counter, two staff looked up simultaneously from their desks, so he talked to them jointly.

"Hi. I've got to make a delivery to Miss Mia Albright or Miss Karen Stinson. Maybe they are clients of yours. Do you know if I can reach either of these women?"

A heavily bearded man shook his head. "Sorry, you're out of luck."

Rejection was something he had become too familiar with. "Oh. That's ok, I'll keep looking for them elsewhere. Sorry to disturb you." He began to turn away.

The accent was a thick as it comes. "Wait. You hurd me wrong. I know where she uz, but you can't deliver anything at the moment. The roads are all buggered with snow." He stood and walked to a large area map was dotted with push-pins and jabbed at a spot with his finger. "There she uz, on the coast about eighteen kilo's from here. It's a property called 'Ram Flat' that faces the water. Roads over the pass have ben cut for a couple o weeks now and'll probably

stay that way for a while. Ut's a real bugger of a season thus year. There's no phones out that way either. Too many hills for mobiles to work."

"How do these people live? What do they do for supplies when this happens?"

He shrugged and said; "Boat. They keep small boats and come into town over water. By road it's about twenty five kilometres, if you cud really call it a road."

Alex took a long look at the part of the map shown. "Thanks, you've given me a starting point."

"I remember the woman Mia. Thought she was a bitch when she just stood and watched me wrestle with the empty bottles instead of lending a hand, then I saw that one sleeve was tied up an she only had one arm. Made me feel like a prick for thinkin that way."

The other office staffer interrupted. "Thut's not a coincidence Bill. We all think you're a prick too."

Alex left the gas depot and returned to the lakeside area. A closer look at the jetty revealed that most the craft had been secured for the season and were not going anywhere soon. He spied a large flat-bottomed aluminium skiff with a white canvas canopy down its length. A large outboard, also covered in white canvas, was tilted out of the water at the end of the craft. A red For Sale sign had been tied to the canopy with a mobile phone number below it. He fumbled

for his own phone and dialled the number. It rang a couple of times and a deep voice said 'Yo.'

"Hello, My name's Alex Kingbridge. I'm standing near your boat at the jetty and I'm interested in renting it for a couple of days."

The reply was terse. "Nope, it's not for rent. Anything could happen to it. Only for sale. I want four grand for it."

'Well, I don't need a boat for anything more than a day or so. After that I'm leaving town. Ok. How about this then. I buy your boat for your four thousand, use it for a couple of days, then bring it back here and sell it back to you for three thousand. You get to sell it again for the full price at no risk and you make an easy grand for no work."

There was a pause at the other end of the phone. Then: "Orright. I'll go for that. I'll see you at the boat in an hour. You'll have the cash then?"

"Yep, I will. I'll be needing a receipt from you too. See you then."

Alex ended the call and made his way to the nearest bank to extract a wad of NZ currency. There were no problems there. They were probably used to holidaymakers realising that they hadn't brought sufficient cash. He had them put it in an envelope for convenience.

One hour later Alex was the owner of a small boat. He'd used small craft before and the prospect of a short trip up the shoreline didn't frighten him. He'd managed to persuade the boat seller to show him how to tilt the motor back into the water and activate it from the front steering console with an electric start. It had a spare drum of fuel and three life jackets wedged under a bench seat.

Alex decided he didn't much like this man. He had an air of arrogance that only reluctantly passed on important facts about the craft. Alex was relieved when the transaction was complete. The rest of the day was spent buying some additional supplies, a map of the lake and extra fuel drum, which he then had filled. There was no telling how long the spare fuel already in the craft had been sitting there and he wasn't going to trust it on mere hearsay.

Later that evening saw a more productive conversation with Tessa as Alex described how he came about acquiring his new leads. She was a little troubled by the idea of the boat. "You're going out alone on that huge lake, in a dinghy, in the middle of winter?....That doesn't seem very smart to me."

"Don't worry about it. The wind has been calm lately and I'll just be following the shoreline a hundred or so metres from land." He failed to elaborate that much of that shoreline would be vertical cliff-face. She grudgingly accepted that this was the best way forward. Alex indicated that He'd be setting off in the morning. If he didn't call back in 48 hours, she was to notify the local police.

Chapter 16

The air moving through the boat was chilly as he surged forward. The bunting on the canopy flapped incessantly. This didn't bother Alex much as the cheap earmuffs he'd purchased to mute the roar of the outboard motor worked well, but mostly they were great just to keep his ears warm. The lake was like a pure sheet of glass and he left a broad wake hundreds of metres wide behind him as the boat surged along the coastline. Occasionally he looked at his phone, which had an active GPS feature to let him know where he was. Still, he also liked to work from a paper map which, apart from being a backup to vulnerable electronics, gave him a better spatial feel of where he really was on the lake.

The trip gave him time to contemplate the twists of fate – his and others, to where he was now. Not many things would have needed to be different in the world for him to be still wrestling with defective farm machinery a few thousand kilometres west of here. Once a person follows that line of thought anything becomes possible, as what series of events had led his mother to take on a job as a typist in Maryborough. Probably just as many obscure factors led to her first encounter with Ben Caslow as the twists of his own experience. Ultimately life was just a bunch of stuff that happened and to read in special meaning where none exists was a futile and sometimes dangerous exercise.

Alex turned the boat around a minor headland. He'd been travelling for some time and despite the warm clothing, the combination of motor vibrations and cold air were starting to give him the shakes.

A few hundred metres in front of the craft he could see a cluster of mature trees around a rambling house set well above the water line. It looked pretty run down. A listing jetty floated at the end of a narrow catwalk. Its top surface was thick with settled snow. On its leading face, the hand-painted words of '*Ram Flat*' could be seen

through a film of frost and lake slime. Alex tied the craft to a mooring peg and stepped onto the high side of the float. It bounced, but held both his weight and the small bag of groceries that he carried. He'd figured that anyone living in a snowbound home on this coastline would at least appreciate some fresh bread and milk.

Next to the jetty a smaller plywood dingy with a tiny outboard had been pulled high on the bank. It too was crusted in snow and he lamented that he'd hate to be going to town in that.

As he approached the house up a thin gravel path he could hear a young male voice call out. "Mum, there's somebody here!" which was probably a good thing, as it wasn't the sort of place that would bother with a doorbell. The door opened and in the doorway stood a wary seventeen year old.

"Hi, I'm Alex Kingbridge. Would there be Mia Albright living here?"

The lad was pushed aside and an equally wary woman in her fifties stood in his place. "That's me. If that bastard Col sent you for money, I haven't got any."

"No, I'm not looking for money. I just wanted to ask about Karen Stinson." Alex quickly added: "It's a good thing not a bad thing. May I come inside?" He offered the plastic grocery bag with the bread and milk clearly visible through the plastic film. She looked at it, then him and decided that he appeared harmless enough, then waved him in. "Brian, go put a pot of tea on." As they entered a darkened lounge, the lad disappeared into the kitchen. He wondered if the 'pot-of-tea' command was some kind of code for him to go fetch a shotgun, but no, there was just a rattle of crockery from the next room.

"I'm trying to locate Karen. I don't know her, but she knew my father a long time ago. There's a law firm in Melbourne that have asked me to pass on a small inheritance to her after my father died."

Her eyes narrowed. "Can't be that small if they sent you all the way here. Normally we don't get many visitors. In the winter we don't get any at all."

Alex hedged his reply. "There's a bit involved."

"Well, she's not here. She went back to Australia about six years ago. What does all of this have to do with you?"

Alex started at the beginning when he had first heard about Ben Caslow and how he came to be where he was now. He showed her the old photograph of the two of them on the staircase. The tea duly arrived, along with a slab of fruit cake. No one seemed to be in a hurry. When he got to the part about the news clippings of Karen's visit to Bali he tried not to notice the empty cardigan sleeve on the woman before him.

"Karen knows how to run a bar. She'd been doing bar work when Olivia and I were doing table work at the same hotel in Sydney. That was a long time ago. She was on her own back then as we were too, so we sort of stuck together and shared the same apartment for a while. Rent in Sydney was always too much for one person to put together.

The hotel boss was an asshole and Karen didn't like the way he kept coming onto her. In the end they had a big blue. She called him names and he sacked her, so we quit too. We'd had enough anyway. Between the three of us we'd saved enough to look at starting up a coffee shop, but we figured we'd earned a break before we got going, so we went on a holiday to Bali. Not a good choice as it turned out." Her eyes grew distant at that. "I still have bad dreams about that place. One moment the three of us were at a table laughing and drinking from tall glasses with little umbrellas, then it was all gone in the explosion, with blood everywhere and a whole lot of pain. Poor Olivia never got to know what'd hit her."

Alex regretted drawing this part of the story from her, as she had patently spent a lot of time trying to forget about it.

"After the bombing, Karen and I were flown back to Darwin and later back to Sydney, where we were in and out of hospitals for a while. Karen copped a lot of cuts to one side of her face, but they stitched her back together mostly ok. My days as a waitress were over. Somehow, I don't seem to carry as many plates and glasses as I used to." She laughed humourlessly at her own joke. "Anyway, the press were pretty full-on back then, trying to pry stories from us and we got a bit sick of that, so we both came here."

"Karen worked in the town for a couple of seasons. Hotel work at the peak times would pay well. I stayed on the farm here and did some bookkeeping, watching sheep grow. Karen eventually got tired of living here and wanted to go back to Oz." She tapered off and stared across the room at nothing in particular, reliving moments passed in her mind. Alex said nothing and waited.

Mia blinked, then turned back to Alex, now very much in the present. "A couple of times I got letters, always from different towns, but nothing for the past five years. Wherever she is now, you can be sure she's behind a bar, working a pub somewhere. I don't know if that helps or not."

She took a sip from her cup and looked at Alex closely. "You did well to find us out here. We keep a pretty low profile. Brian runs a post office box in town for our mail, but uses his father's family name, not mine. Our road to town is rubbish. It goes over a high pass and most winters it gets cut off for a month. This year it's been longer. I don't like going to town in our dodgy boat. The motor has a pull start that gives me problems when it stops."

Still trying to tune to the local accent, Alex heard her pronounce 'pull' as though it rhymed with 'dull' and he had to think about this for a moment. Then he went on to describe his search and how he eventually traced Mia through the heating gas company.

He finished the rest of the tea and parked the cup on its saucer. "Look, I'm going to head back into town now, but maybe you can help me out with something." Alex fished in his wallet for the receipt of the boat sale, placed it on the coffee table and smoothed it out with his hand. From a shirt pocket he extracted a pen and wrote '*Paid in full by Mia Albright*' below the previous owner's name. "You see, I have this boat to get rid of and if you can follow me back to town you'd be doing me a favour by taking it off my hands." He passed the sheet to her. "I'm not looking for payment, you understand."

She looked at him for a long time, then nodded. For the first time since they met she gave a thin smile. "Thanks. It's going to mean a lot to us up here."

The return across the lake was solemn. The engine was loud enough to block any exchange of words, but not much remained to be said. As before, the lake was mirrored glass. It seemed a small act of vandalism to tear the surface with the progress of the small craft. Thick blue-black cloud sat on the peaks of the mountains that surrounded them, as if the high rock faces were the only force keeping them from the water. Dark shapes broke the horizon ahead where the lake met the land. Dotted specks of yellow light slowly resolved into Wanaka. Distant cars could be seen cruising the foreshore like ants on a string, but their little boat was still the only craft in sight.

Soon enough, they tied up at the jetty. When all had reached dry land, Alex headed for his accommodation. Over his shoulder he could see Mia and her son walk in the opposite direction. He suspected that they would use the trip to buy more supplies before heading home in their new craft.

Alex never learned about the relationship between Mia, her son and the obviously absent father, but as the topic never came up, he figured it wasn't for him to know.

He made a brief call to the previous owner of the boat to let him know that he'd decided to sell the craft to someone else. The guy wasn't happy about the changed plans, but Alex didn't care. The man had steadfastly refused to rent the boat in the first place and did eventually get the full asking price. Besides, he thought, the man was a shithead and didn't deserve a windfall.

Alex spent a restless final night in the Wanaka motel room. In the morning, he transferred his meagre luggage to the hire car, wiped off as much snow as he could from the roof and bonnet, then struck out on the road to Queenstown. A roadside noticeboard on the outskirts of Wanaka declared the road over the pass to be cleared and open. The airline ticket in his pocket indicated that return flight over the Tasman was going to be another late one and there were still some hours to kill. Upon his return to Queenstown, it gave Alex the opportunity to explore the harbour area that had looked so enticing from the air on the inward flight. He'd skipped the chance upon arrival to see what the town had to offer and it now seemed like the right thing to do.

While it was unashamedly a tourist town, Queenstown was a pretty place. He enjoyed wandering the narrow streets and peering into shops. '*Tessa would like this*' he thought. It would have been pleasant to explore the place in her company, but regrettably, leisure had not been the motivation for this journey.

The two had spoken at length the previous night. Tessa was initially dismayed that he'd travelled such a long way and essentially drawn a blank, but Alex didn't see it that way. He'd learned something more about the woman he was searching for and this too was important. Also, he'd discovered that the elusive Karen was likely to be still working in a hotel somewhere and this fact was of value. An internet search showed that there were around seven thousand Australian hotels to choose from, plus it was also possible she'd found a job in a licensed sports club or RSL somewhere, but it was best not to think about that just yet.

It was very late when Alex finally stepped off the train at West Wyalong. The platform and streets were largely deserted and his steps echoed loudly from the shop fronts on the far side of the street. His head still reeling from the many connections and the vast kilometres travelled.

His original room had been retained and paid for before departure, so he fumbled in his pack for the room key and unlocked the door. Ignoring all else, he crashed on the bed and sleep followed scant seconds after shoes were kicked to the floor.

Chapter 17

Well into the morning Alex opened his eyes and revelled in the native warmth of the room. As spectacular as it was, the frigid New Zealand air had been something of a shock to the system. A long soak under the hot shower brought more coherence to his thoughts. The dominant one of hunger took control and offered up the memory of the café up the road. He found a shirt and jeans that didn't look too grubby and dragged a comb through still drying hair, then thought that some sunshine and fresh air were in order.

As the door to the car park was propped open, he spied a local newspaper that had been dropped on the mat outside. No doubt placed by the establishment in an effort to gain an extra half-star for their internet marketing. On the front page, the headline picture and caption caught his attention. '*Putting The Grand back together – local group forms to reopen the old Theatre*' Central to the page was a large image of the spiral staircase. Alex carried the paper back to the table and quickly digested its content.

'The Wyalong historical society had discovered that the old Grand theatre that had been closed down thirty years ago when its staircase was condemned does in fact have a replacement staircase that was nearly completed. With the assistance of some local volunteers they are examining what it will take to re-open the building for special events.' There was little substance to the article, but it was intriguing nonetheless. Normally Alex would go about his life, keeping a low profile without making any waves. This was a bit different and now it seemed that his presence in the town was stirring things up a bit. He folded the paper, spent a few minutes tidying up the room, latched the door and made his way to the street.

Immediately he saw fresh signs of activity. An unusual number of vehicles were parked out the front of the old theatre. Several of them were contractors with ladders and scaffolding sections piled high in the rear. The double doors were both open and some sheets of ply had been laid down to protect the floor surface. Alex followed the plywood trail deep into the building.

Near the base of the stairwell a plastic folding table took up space. Drawings and notes were strewn over much of its surface. Clive, as always in his immaculate attire, was talking animatedly with two men in matching brown overalls. A conversation was in progress about scaffolding. Nearby stood a cluster of floodlights on tripod stands, illuminating the incomplete *Back to the future* mural. Alex paused to examine this. Two young women and a man all in their late teens were busily dabbing paint at it from plywood pallets. Immediately behind them an aged woman in a powered wheelchair was dishing out stern advice. Even before he saw her face, he recognised the voice as that of the woman in the nursing home. 'Maggie' he remembered. Oblivious to Alex she waved a stick at the young painter from her powered chair. "Hey, numbnuts! That's not

cyan. What're they teaching you at school? We're not screwin about with finger paintin y'know."

"Alex. I was afraid you had left us for good." The voice of Clive from behind diverted his attention back to the table. The two contractors were walking away and Clive now smiled thoughtfully at Alex.

"I'm still here, at least for a few more days. I had an errand to run. So. What's the plan here?"

An obviously delighted Clive waved his arms around expansively and spoke in his usual measured precision that Alex had grown to enjoy. "It's all happening and I believe we have you to thank for it. The stair is being completed as we speak. Jim Roache from the timber yard is on-board and has prepared the much needed wood. Bernard is running with that. We couldn't keep Maggie away from here once she saw the chance to complete her mural."

"What's the rush? This place has been empty for nearly thirty years."

"Exactly right. We have a target date to meet. October 21, only a week away." Alex just stared blankly at this and Clive continued. "You'll recall that the building was locked up back in '85 just before premiering the *Back to the Future* film and the stack of reels we found had never been run. In the movie they travelled into the future and arrived on October 21, 2015. What better way to have a grand opening than to finally show it at the exact time that Marty McFly stepped out of his time machine?"

Alex laughed. "That's so cool."

"But there's much to be done. Modern fire codes require an alternate exit before we can use any of the upstairs seating." He beamed at these new developments. "We're breaking through the old doorway that lead to the original outside stair. The newer building next-door had its own fire exit that runs from its roof to the rear lane. They've agreed to let us add a scaffolding bridge from our mezzanine to their emergency stair, that'll give the compliance we need."

Maggie propelled herself into the conversation, squinting at Alex from her chair. "I've seen you. You're the fellow that came to the centre last month."

"Yes." He nodded. "I spoke with Nate to find what became of Karen Mayville. She was here when the stair was being built."

Maggie released a long breath. "Yeah, that was a bloody shame about that girl. I remember she hooked up with that Stinson asshole. I wonder what happened to her?"

Alex held his hands wide in exasperation. "That's what I've been trying to learn, but the trail's gone cold." No one had anything to add to that, so after a moment he gestured at the mural and continued; "You seem to have your hands full supervising your budding artists here."

She shook her head in feigned disgust. "They're bloody hopeless. We got on to the Secondary school here to send a couple of art students to help finish the job. I recon I could do better with a mop on a stick."

"Aren't you being a bit harsh? They look like they're trying hard to get the job done."

Maggie pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "These tossers grew up in a time when nobody is allowed to yell at anyone for anything. When I yell at em, they don't know what to say, cos they're not supposed to go crook at old people. *'Be kind to the senile cos They don't know any better.'* But bugger em. They need to be told properly when they screw up, or they'll screw up again. They can massage their bruised little ego's when I'm deep in the ground."

The conversation was interrupted by a bright light that made them all squint. The upstairs projector had been activated and ran an advertisement on the big screen at the far end of the room. There was no sound, but it was for a menswear shop, showing young men with droopy moustaches and mullet hair, prancing about in flared pants and body shirts.

Clive tilted his chin in the general direction of the projection room. "Nate's up there. We carried him up the stairs earlier. He says that no one else would know how to drive his gear." The screen cut to a dapper Paul Hogan on a golf course trying to sell Winfield cigarettes to a past generation.

"I expect he's right. These film clips haven't seen the light of day for a while."

The vivid projection dropped out, leaving the three to blink in semi-darkness while their eyes adjusted to the change.

Alex poked around for a few moments and concluded that these people were doing quite well without him. He bade goodbye, made his way back through the dim entrance and stepped once more onto the street. The deadened sounds of the heavily carpeted cinema were replaced by street noise and bright sunlight. Yet again his eyes were forced to sharply readjust and he released a slow breath of annoyance.

"How bout a ride mister?" The phrase came from a voice behind him and he turned to follow it. Tessa stood there. She had her back to the building with folded arms, wearing firm denims and an oversized tee-shirt. The ponytail was gone and loose hair fell chaotically around her shoulders.

He was utterly surprised. Grinning like an idiot, Alex held his arms wide and said: "*Oh, Tessa, are you a sight for sore eyes*" to complete the classic parody.

Tessa rubbed her eyes and wearily returned the smile. "Yes, they are sore. I just drove up from Melbourne and I'm a bit stuffed, so you can buy me a breakfast."

He tilted his head to one side. "Please tell me that you like Eggs Benedict." Alex took her hand with both of his and walking backwards, drew Tessa to the centre of the footpath.

Alex was thoroughly elated to see her, but could also tell that the long drive had been exhausting.

Chapter 18

Only a short time ago He'd felt regret that Tessa hadn't been with him to share his adventure in New Zealand. Now here she was in person. He experienced a high that he couldn't quite fathom, but didn't want it to stop.

They arrived at the café. It was an old one. Its glass façade was bordered by polished copper frames. Alex pressed the door open and ushered Tessa in. Across a pristine floor of white tile, scattered rows of two and four seat tables took up space in front of a long counter. Along one wall a woodgrain dado with a mirrored wall above it added style to the room. In front of this, a series of booths with bench seats offered additional dining space with more privacy. Alex guided her to one of these.

At the head of the table was a polished juke-box terminal that belonged to a different era, but it was well illuminated and presumably still functioned. A series of flip-menus behind its glass listed the front and rear titles of '45 records. The anachronisms of a classic fifties café still worked their magic and the room was well patronised, even for this time of the day.

A girl in a suitably attired in red and white chequered apron appeared at the foot of the table, notepad in hand.

Tessa got in early. "Eggs. Benedict apparently. For two. Also coffee. Oh, and orange juice." She pointed across the table at Alex. "He's paying." The girl nodded and retreated into the kitchen through batwing doors.

"So, do you always leave your travel companions with the bill?"

She nodded. "Yep. I do today." Then opened a purse and slid a strip of paper over the table to Alex.

He peered at it. The strip was a bank cheque for just over one million dollars, made payable to him."

"That's your inheritance payment...so far. I've been authorised by the partners to pass it on. What happens from here depends on beneficiaries that turn up downstream."

He picked up the strip and stared at it blankly, then flicked a corner with his index finger and it made a suitably loud 'thwack' sound.

"Ok then. Good answer. Can I get you a muffin as well?"

"Choc-chip?"

"Hey, steady on. I'm not made of money y'know."

The small talk continued until the meal arrived, but it slowed down as they ate. Tessa was obviously flagging from her long drive.

When the plates were cleared away, Alex paid the tab and he escorted her back to the street. By now she was yawning a lot. He grasped her hand and slowly they strolled back to the motel.

He could tell that she was beat. Leading her to the edge of the bed, he sat her down and pulled at her shoes. No resistance was offered. Tessa fell back, closed her eyes and was totally out of it. Within a minute she was breathing evenly. Alex pulled a heavy quilt over her, quietly moved to the kitchen area and prepared another coffee for himself.

Some hours later Alex lay prone on the small couch that backed onto the wall opposite the bed, where he too had dozed for a while. He opened his eyes and saw Tessa looking at him with the thick quilt still pulled tight around her chin.

She seemed a lot more alert and chided him from where she lay.

"So, do you have a Nanna nap every day, or am I just boring you?

He smirked and stretched his arms. "You make it sound bad when you only give me two options. That's Lawyer talk. All the other girls usually give me at least three."

"All the other girls? I'm impressed. I suppose that a fellow like you would have a small harem in all the towns you visit. '*The King of Tarts*'. A victim of hero worship I suppose."

He shook his head. "No. You're confusing me with '*The Queen of Hearts*' which is a playing card, and that's not me either."

"Sadly I'm either a hero because someone has a problem to fix and they need me to put it right, or there is no problem and I'm mostly invisible. Ha!" It was an empty laugh. "Sure I meet a girl from time to time for a chat or a night out, but mostly I'm a convenient tool for difficult jam jars that need opening. Nobody wants to get too close when my work takes me to another town, never to be seen again." He looked at her on the bed and felt a swirl of emotions. "Of course, in your case, I'd make exceptions. If you have any stuck jars with you, I'd love to help out. In fact, there's a supermarket up the road, I could go buy some jam with the toughest looking lids in the store, bring them back here and open them one at a time..."

"So, it's been a while for you then...?"

Not trusting himself to say more, he simply said "Yeah."

She pulled back the blanket a little to reveal bare shoulders. For the first time he noticed that her clothes were bundled on the floor. "Well, it's been way too long for me. Get your ass over here tool boy."

He grinned, looked straight at her and began to slowly unbutton his shirt. "Doesn't your company have a policy about dating clients?"

She airily waved an arm. "Well, I don't see anybody else from the office here. Besides, you're not a client, technically you're contracted staff. We don't have a policy about contractors, except that we're supposed to be nice to them. So stop pissing around with those buttons and we'll explore the legal meaning of the word '*nice*'"

The bed was warm. The part of his brain that registers such things noted it was like an electric blanket on '2', but much, much more pleasant. The motel room bed didn't respond well to the extra weight and sagged in the centre bringing them delightfully closer. He ventured a delicate, but lingering kiss that brought a placid smile of contentment to her face. Either he or the bed had definitely moved closer to a *three*. "Ah...the law is a wonderful thing and I'm beginning to change my mind about the resourcefulness of lawyers too."

She silenced him with a finger across his lips. "You're supposed to be the resourceful one, prove it."

He drew her hand away and rose to his knees under the covers. It wasn't long before she had all the proof she needed.

Chapter 19

Some time later Alex glanced at the clock and wondered where the day had gone. He thought he'd recovered from his overseas travel, but it obviously was taking a little longer. He arose, showered and tapped the boil button on the tiny kettle supplied with the room. Ignoring the little packets of bitter coffee that came with the room, Alex opened a fresh jar of his preferred blend and prepared two cups.

Tessa was sitting up. "God I went out like a light earlier. I didn't notice it so much at the time, but that long car trip took it out of me." She nodded at the coffee preparations. "I hope one of those cups is for me."

"No, when I wake up I always have two cups of coffee – in separate cups." He handed one to her and sat on the edge of the bed.

Alex asked: "I'm thinking that you must have a very forgiving boss. How do you get away with it? Just hopping in the car and dropping out for a few days."

She nodded as if agreeing to the conundrum. "Well...I have a small admission to make. I told you that my name was Tessa Rathdown. That's my mother's family name. Really it's '*Close*', as in *Blomfield & Close*. It was my father who originally accepted this case from your father, then let it slide.

For the past couple of years I'd been working for him. Then he retired and that slid me into position as a partner of the firm. There was much rejoicing and sticky cake was handed around the office, but in real terms, the training wheels are still on. Some thought that

I would crack under the pressure, so there are a few sets of eyes watching me."

"Yeah, and I have two of them," Alex retorted, although the revelation about her position in the firm surprised him.

"So, are you breaking the rules here, or what?"

She shook her head in curt denial. "No. I'm doing the job. What happens beyond that is none of their business." She stood up, gathered her clothes and made for the bathroom. Her head protruded from the doorway briefly. "Speaking of which, our trail seems to have gone cold for the moment. I'd like to catch up with that projectionist you met. Perhaps it's not too late to pay him a visit today." She disappeared back into the bathroom and began running taps.

A few minutes later, Tessa reappeared fully clothed, but was vigorously rubbing wet hair with a towel. She continued the conversation where she had left off. "I found some more info about ownership law on those old movie prints, but I wanted to ask that projectionist Nate Marlowe a couple of questions about how they were originally ordered. Maybe he can remember something."

They used Tessa's car making their way back to the nursing home. She claimed that her air conditioning worked better than Alex's, but really, it was the plastic she'd seen on his window that was a little off-putting. With the fat cheque he'd pocketed the day before, he'd have few excuses now for not doing something about it.

At the nursing home, they retraced Alex's earlier steps through the reception area. It was a slow, sullen afternoon and all those they saw appeared to be going through their separate little routines, waiting for the day to finish. The entire building seemed to take pride in isolating itself from the outside world, as though reality were just one more channel on a flat screen TV, with its volume turned down.

A duty nurse informed them that Nate was in the Day Room, but weary from his earlier excursion into the town. He was dozing lightly in his chair when the nurse placed a hand on his shoulder. "Nate,... there are some people here to see you."

He awoke with a start. "What the fuck do yer want?" He caught sight of the pair. "Oh, its you again. Who's yer friend?"

"Nate, this is Tessa. She's come up from Melbourne. She's been helping Clive to sort out the legal situation with the films we found back at the cinema."

"Well, I'm glad to meet you then." He wiped his hands on his pants and held up one for Tessa to shake. She took it with some trepidation, hoping that the hand wipe was simply a gesture and not a vain attempt to remove something elusive from his fingers.

Tessa got straight to the point. "After talking over some of the details with Clive I did some research on the laws that affect abandoned goods.

If back in 1985 you originally received those films under standard arrangements, then there is a strong case in your favour. Do you

remember any of those conditions?"

He rubbed his chin a little, deep in thought. "I don't recall anything special. We had an arrangement of pre-paying for a fixed number of screenings, then the films were retuned to the distributor in Sydney. After each show we updated a log sheet on the side of the first reel. Some reels had run their course and were stacked to be sent back. Others still had a bit to go, but when we were first shut down, they'd been shelved for too long and we couldn't use em again. People stop goin to screenings only a few weeks after launch. There was a pretty big churn rate of new movies." His eyes grew distant and brow furrowed as he struggled to remember these earlier times.

The old projectionist returned his gaze back to Tessa. "That time travel movie Clive found was ordered for our big opening. So it was never shown, even though we paid for a pile of screenings up front."

She nodded. "That's pretty much how I thought it was. It's a tricky situation, but my advice was that the cinema should still be good to show the old prints anyway."

Alex had taken a step back and now just listened. This was all beyond his experience and Tessa seemed to know her stuff.

"Normally abandoned goods that have been left behind would default to the owners of the property of the site of abandonment. This automatically happens over time, particularly if no claim for repossession or theft was ever made. But here's the thing. Copyright protection is pretty powerful and lasts a long time, so the present owner of the theatre, which appears to be the Shire Council, has a strong case for possession over the film canisters, even though they were only rented from the distributor thirty years ago."

She paused, making sure he was taking it all in, then continued. "However, legal possession of the movie doesn't entitle the new owners to expose the copywrited contents to a public performance.

But.. and here is the key point, the original agreement for showing the films a fixed number of times has not been extinguished, even if the distributor no longer exists. So the original right to perform the screenings still stands.

Maybe the people who own the copyright will jump up and down, but today's owner of the building can still show the movies for the originally agreed number of screenings. After that, the films have a novelty value, but you can't show them again in public performance without a fresh agreement in place."

Nate listened carefully and nodded in understanding.

"There's a good chance that Clive and the Shire finance people can sell these old prints back to a distribution house, or swap them for a credit to show different movies in the future."

"Really, I think that they'd get more for them if they were sold at auction to private bidders, as they could view them for personal use if they have the machinery to run them, but they couldn't show them in public."

He nodded again. "Yep I get all of that. I used to wrestle with screening agreements on a regular basis. What you say sounds about right. Thanks. You've done a grand job sorting that all out."

He turned to Alex. "You started all this goin's on y'know. You've stirred up a shitload lot of people."

He laughed, always entertained by Nate's direct turn of phrase. "No. I don't think so. I came here just to find someone and I haven't done a very good job of that yet either."

"Yeah, well. I know what I see. And now I see a lot of people gettin involved with the old Grand. Givin em somethin to do, instead of just vegin in front of the telly. Mesself included."

Alex could see that Nate meant what he'd said and he now appeared to be a much different person than the fractured soul that he'd met a few short weeks ago.

There was an '*oof*' of exertion sounding behind him and a young nursing aide approached pushing a heavy box trolley. It looked a somewhat like the aisle trolleys he'd seen on airlines, but a bit wider. There was a broad tray on top and a row of paper soup cups, each with a name label on the side. They held a range of medications for many of the residents here.

The young girl was jolly but obviously weary from pushing the heavy cart. "Come on Nate, it's time for your meds." She offered the cup with his name on it, with four different coloured pills rattling around in its bottom.

Nate rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Friends, I'd like to introduce Jean, our very own drug pusher." He chuckled at his own joke.

"Alright Nate, that stopped being funny a long time ago. Now take your dam pills or you'll turn into a mean, crotchety old man." She feigned a shocked expression. "Oh my god...I'm too late!"

"Yeah, yeah. I know the drill." He explained. "Jean's been shitty since her trolley stopped workin a month ago. It's supposed to be motorised, but it quit. Now she has to push the bloody thing everywhere."

Alex piped up, somewhat interested. "Really? What happens when you try to make it go?"

Jean replied: "Oh, it has a press-bar here across the handle. When I pull back it's supposed to move forward slowly, but all it does is leap forward with a jerk and stop. Our electrician guy says he doesn't know anything about powered carts and won't touch it."

Alex sensed a challenge. "I've has some experience with these sorts of things. Would you like me to check it out?" He looked at Tessa and Nate who both shrugged dismissively.

Jean was more enthusiastic. "Really? Give me five minutes and I'll finish my round. I'll drag it back to the nurse's station and meet you there."

Tessa watched the girl struggle away with the unpowered trolley and offered; "Are you sure you want to get involved here?"

Alex shrugged. "I've seen these situations a lot. A bit of equipment stops working and the owner just struggles along, wasting time and energy, just because they don't know what to do. Or they waste lots of money on a replacement when the root of the problem is just a broken wire or something. It won't hurt to take a look."

The three waited at the nursing station and watched Jean force the sluggish trolley into the centre of the room. She demonstrated the problem by activating the power switch. "See, I push the lever to go forward, it jerks a few centimetres and just stops."

Tessa saw Alex take a small screwdriver from his pocket that she didn't know he carried and as the seconds ticked by screws and metal plates from the trolley began to accumulate in a paper cup on the floor. He borrowed a diagnostic light from the nurse station, then crouched down and peered inside.

"Yep, I see what's happening. This machine has a row of drive transistors and one of them has shorted out. I can see a hole burned through the front of one."

Again he plunged into it with his screwdriver, then thrust one hand inside, screwed up his face in concentration and bent the defective part back and forth. Moments later he withdrew the hand, now

holding a charred square of a broken transistor between thumb and forefinger.

"Lets give that a try." He powered up the trolley, pulled on the drive lever and it began to move forward smoothly.

"There we go. That'll buy a little time." He explained. "When this part failed, the trolley tried to run flat out, but the control circuit detected the fault and automatically killed the power after a second or so. I just pulled the broken bit so it can run on the rest of the parts without tripping out."

He crouched down once more and began to screw the cover plates back on.

"It should still be replaced, but it will work ok at slightly reduced power."

His eyes were level with the top of the trolley. The rows of names printed on the pill cups were very much in evidence. One struck a chord. It took a moment to digest its importance. '*Beth Stinson.*' He placed a finger on it and turned to Nate, who was watching the proceedings with interest from his wheelchair. "Do you know who this is?"

"Yeah, that's old Beth. She's here too, but she don't say much nowdays." Again he rubbed his hand over his coarse chin. "Yeah." He repeated. "Never really thought about it, but she was the mother of that prick Merv."

Tessa queried. "Merv? Who's he?"

Alex recalled his first conversation with Nate. "Merv was a bit of a no-hoper that Karen was married to for a while, before he died in a car crash."

Nate added. "Yeah, did the world a favour when that pisshead dis'ed himself in a creek. Beth is still round here somewhere. Jean'll know."

Alex turned to Jean who had been watching the trolley repair with vested interest. "Can I speak with Beth Stinson?"

"You can try, if she is awake. I think she's in the North Sun room when I last saw her. I can take you there."

Nate showed disinterest. "You lot can carry on. I'm buggered and I'm headin back to me room."

Chapter 20

Jean, the young aide, guided Alex and Tessa through another maze of hallways and ramps that took them between different buildings. They arrived at a broad room with windows on two sides. A solitary figure was reclined in a portable cot, facing one of these. On the wall beside her a large flat screen television babbled away at low volume screening an inconsequential sitcom that was totally ignored.

The woman was awake. She had a shock of white curly hair and rheumy eyes. Time had been cruel, but she was attentive and slowly turned her head to follow their approach.

Jean spoke quite loudly and made an introduction. "Beth, you have some people here to see you. This is Tessa and Alex."

There was a pause while she absorbed this new development, then spoke very softly and delicately.

"Hello, I don't believe we've met. Please forgive me for not getting up."

Alex started the dialogue. "I'm sorry for disturbing you Mrs Stinson." She said nothing in reply, so he continued. "A long time ago my father knew Karen, before she later married your son Mervin. We've been trying to find Karen for a long time, but haven't had any luck."

Her face darkened. "Yes one of my sons was Mervin. I regret that he was not a pleasant person and I, like so many others did not grieve long when he died." Then she smiled again. The one good thing he did was to bring Karen into my life. She was always the daughter I never had." Then she peered critically at Alex. "I don't quite see where you fit in. If you're trying to get money from her, you won't succeed and I won't help you either."

The two visitors looked at each other in silent agreement. Alex gave a small nod and Tessa waded into the conversation.

"Mrs Stinson, I work for a law firm in Melbourne. A long time ago, before Alex was born, his father Ben Caslow, knew your daughter for a while, when she worked at the cinema in town. They separated when the cinema failed. Some time after that this fellow Ben came into some money, but unfortunately died shortly afterwards." Tessa paused to make sure the old woman was taking this all in.

The woman narrowed her eyes shrewdly. "Go on dear, I may be old, but I'm not stupid. Just don't talk for too long, or I might not live to hear the end of the story."

It was obvious that obfuscatory dialog would not be tolerated here, so Tessa got to the point.

"Ben Caslow wanted to pass on some money to Karen after his death, but the process stalled for a long, long time. Alex and I have been trying to find Karen to deliver this inheritance. While it is very late, it was invested well. She has about one million dollars coming to her. That is, if we can find her. It's a long shot, but we were hoping you may know how we can make contact with her."

"Oh." She paused and repeated herself. "Oh...I see. My, when I think of the times that she could have used that money. "Her voice trailed off a little. "Very well then. I did tell you that she was like a daughter to me." The old woman carefully peeled back a triangle of pale blue blanket that covered her and revealed an old beaded handbag that

she kept by her side for the things that were important to her. She briefly rummaged around in its interior and withdrew a dog-eared envelope. Carefully, she took a handwritten letter from it, which was then thrust back into the handbag.

She clutched the envelope in a thin and spotted hand that was slowly extended to Tessa. "I believe that this is what you have been looking for. "

Tessa took the envelope. She and Alex examined it together. On the front was the address of Beth at this nursing home. On the rear was another address. ***Sender: K. Stinson C/O Range Hotel, Coolgardie, W.A.***

Coolgardie in Western Australia. This was a long way away.

Beth interrupted their reading. "She is doing ok over there now. This letter is about two months old. You must promise me not to bring more darkness into her life. She has been through enough already."

Alex looked up from the envelope, a little awestruck that the information he looked for so dearly had been so close to where he had sought it. Even then, it had been only a series of fluke events that had brought it to the surface.

"Mrs Stinson, I think I speak with confidence when I say that causing harm to Karen could not be further from our thoughts. Thank you very much."

With the envelope firmly within their grasp the two returned to the car.

Alex looked at his watch. "Western Australia is still three hours behind us, so it's ok to call them now."

A brief internet search gave them a phone number for the *Range Hotel* in Coolgardie. With some trepidation, Alex dialled the number.

A man's voice answered with the simple prompt: "The Range..." There was a lot of background chatter and noise.

"Hi, I'd like to speak to Karen,...Karen Stinson?"

"One Moment" There was the sound of a hand being held over the mouthpiece and a shouted conversation dimly in the background with a third person. "Nah, she's not here, right now, but you'll get her most times, she's usually somewhere around the bar." There were more extraneous sounds of crowds and drinks being ordered.. "Gotta go now. Maybe try tomorrow." Then with a click the phone fell silent .

For several moments no one said anything. Then Tessa spoke.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that we need to go to W.A."

She stared ahead seeming not to have heard the reply. Then nodded, pulled out her own phone and began making calls to her Melbourne office.

Chapter 21

Coolgardie was a long way from anywhere. There was nothing like a direct flight to be had from their part of the country. They settled on a poor second-best, which was a train to Sydney, a flight to Perth and a second flight to the Kalgoorlie-Boulder airport. Here a hire car would be waiting to take them the rest of the way.

The connections were dreary, with lots of dead time in hard, plastic seats in different places. Mostly at these times, they seemed to be surrounded by glum travellers intent on playing with their phones to the exclusion of all else. It was with some relief that the two finally descended the mobile stair at the Kalgoorlie airport and felt the dry warmth of the mid-morning desert air swirling around them.

They were directed to a white relocatable hut that backed onto the airport building. Here they saw a 'Car Hire' sign in ancient red vinyl lettering with curled, disintegrating edges. Alex absently commented. "They shouldn't use red out here. The colour red is a complex molecule that strong ultraviolet loves to trash...." At another time he probably would have expanded on this thought, but his heart wasn't in it just then. Tessa said nothing, but re-shouldered her travel bag and continued on the path to the outbuilding.

A brisk and surprisingly efficient man in his mid-twenties ticked a few boxes on a clip-board, obtained a signature and slid a thick key on the counter with a VW logo embossed on the side. Then he took them to the doorway and pointed out a black sedan parked in partial shade some fifty metres away. As the two stepped out, the door was quickly hauled closed to preserve the air conditioning.

The car and others that surrounded it in the park had all had ungainly roo bars fitted to the front. Probably the insurers grew weary of the extensive damage caused by capricious behaviour of wildlife on the roads at night.

While initially stifling inside, the vehicle cooling quickly did its job. Both felt some relief beyond the falling temperature by their return to a vehicle that they had some control over. Alex manoeuvred the car out of the airport and immediately encountered an overhead sign pointing the way to Coolgardie. There were only some sixty kilometres further to go.

Alex broke the silence again. "Volkswagen huh? I wonder if this is the polluting one or the fuel efficient one?" A glib reference to the engine software scandal that had echoed around the world that year.

The road was wide, and easy to negotiate in almost non-existent traffic. Mining was the name of the game in this part of the world. That and grey-nomad tourism. They frequently overtook large RV's towing behemoth-like caravans behind them. Tessa extracted a bottle of water from her bag took a drink, then passed it to Alex.

Conversation had come and gone in small parcels, which was how Alex liked it. There was no pressure to maintain chatter simply to fill a void. He recalled part of an old Mark Twain quote that said in order to really know someone you must first travel with them. Certainly he was feeling good about the trip so far.

Tessa must have been deep in her own thoughts too, as after a few minutes she asked a question. "Alex, when you grew up as a child, your adoptive parents made no secret of it. Weren't you curious about your real parents?"

He pursed his lips and looked straight ahead a little before venturing a reply. "They were good to me. I was well fed and clothed, so much so, that I completely took my surroundings for granted. I was like any kid, focused on school, schoolmates and whatever projects I was working on at the time."

He turned to look at her briefly. "When you're completely focused on 'now' what took place in the past never felt important. Sure I was curious in principle, but it was more like the curiosity where you try to recall the name of an elusive actor in a movie you've seen. It would be nice to know, but – you know, not important enough to spend time on. Maybe I wouldn't have felt the same way if I'd had it tougher, but to me they *were* my parents and that was enough."

Tessa slowly nodded in understanding and they travelled in silence for a few more kilometres. Then she spoke again. "Alex, I've decided that I hate being called a lawyer. Oh, I like being a lawyer, it's what I want to do and what I've studied for, but it's the labelling I don't like.

Alex absorbed this new revelation with mild amusement. "What's wrong with the labelling? If it's that crappy wooden block on your desk with your name on it, I could make you a nicer one in red Jarrah." He ran his fingers through the air underlining invisible text. "It could say '*TESSA THE ACE*' and all of your fellow workers would be dead jealous."

Tessa snorted. "Stop being obtuse Alex. Look, say I go to a social function, I'm dressed up, good shoes, makeup, the works. I could be anyone and it shouldn't matter. Every second guy I meet says 'What do you do' and if I say that I work for a law firm, bam! Right there. It's like they write 'Lawyer' on a card and staple it to my forehead. With that one word I have been tagged and branded. I'm not regarded as having any thoughts, skills or any kind of a life beyond what TV lawyers do. The thing is, that's not how I see myself."

Alex held the steering wheel steady. "It's a pigeon hole mentality that you're up against. Human nature really. Someone looks at you and wants to know if you are a potential friend that can help their private cause in some way, a foe who's world vision is at odds with their own, or some kind of a weirdo to be avoided at all cost."

"Well, what do you do in those situations?"

"Ha! Not a problem. I make a careful assessment of what they look like, how they sound and what I already know about them, then I carefully choose words that make them think that I'm a weirdo to be avoided at all cost."

She laughed and Alex continued. "So, this is a trap I don't want to fall into with you. I'd better start at the beginning." He cleared his throat and sat up straighter in his seat. "My My, young lady, you look *amazingly* dynamic, I'm sure you couldn't possibly be a lawyer. What incredible things do you do with yourself to pass the time of day?"

Tessa absently fingered the end of her ponytail between thumb and forefinger. "Oh, I do a small amount of legal work to fill in time, but mostly I jog and do rock climbing."

He looked at her directly. "Really? Rock climbing?" She nodded. "Oh, so you must be one of *those* rock climbing type people."

The resulting punch in his arm did much to authenticate the strength of her rock-climbing muscles.

After a long, straight stretch the road curved to the right and a faded *Welcome to Coolgardie* sign swam into view. The imminence of their arrival shifted the conversation to the matter at hand. Both agreed that Alex should make first contact and defer to Tessa when specifics of the will were to be revealed.

The *Range Hotel* was located by the simple expedience of driving up the main street and looking for it. Nearly all of the pubs in the town faced the path most travelled and the pure white façade of *The Range* was easy to see. Angle parking spaces out the front were well occupied, but gaps were evident a little way past the landmark building. The Volkswagen slid into one of these. In unison the two

climbed the high gutter to the footpath, then tread the well worn steps at the bar entrance.

Inside trade was light. Some men in their mid-twenties were engaged in a game of pool. Horses were racing on an overhead screen with odds scrolling beneath the live feed. They approached the bar, but the only barman they could see was serving in an adjoining lounge. He was a big guy wearing a tank-top sporting a picture of a tall beer and the words '*Home on the Range*' The barman caught their eye and gave a minuscule nod. Half a minute later he sauntered over. Alex ordered two beers. While they were being drawn from the tap Alex ventured the main question.

"I wanted to catch up with Karen today. Is she around someplace?"

He sounded surprised. "Well, that's a helluva thing. No she's not. Normally Karen's here every day."

"Is there a way we can contact her? We've come a long way to meet her"

He parked the two beers on the towel and shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Last night one of our interstate drivers was in for a sip and I heard him call 'Hey Karen, you're from West Wyalong aintcha?' and he dropped a paper on the counter from that part of the world. It had a picture of a staircase on it and something about a cinema reopening." The barman rubbed his chin and repeated. "That was a helluva thing. She read the article, put her apron on the bar an said. 'Bob.'" He thumbed his chest. "That's me. She said 'Bob'

I gotta go. I'm takin some hol's' Then she buggered off and I haven't seen her since." He shook his head again. "Fuckin heluva thing."

A crestfallen Alex paid for the drinks and looked at Tessa, whose eyes mirrored his frustration. Holding his chilled glass, Alex sighed. "We were so close. Why does it always have to be so hard? If I'd just stayed put in West Wyalong, she would have come to us."

"You could never know that. Alex, you were the trigger that brought the stair and cinema back to life. Without you, she'd still be here drawing beers today. So now we drag our butts back to West Wyalong and find her there. Our mission hasn't changed."

"Yeah." While knowing what she said to be true, he was still disappointed.

Alex sighed and downed the rest of his beer. "Lets hit it."

Back on the street the day continued to heat up. He'd like to have stayed and looked around, but knew that this was not a leisure trip and the clock was still ticking for Tessa. They retraced their steps to the rapidly heating interior of the Volkswagen. After backing onto the bitumen shoulder, they moved in the original direction, found an intersection wide enough to support a U-turn and headed back to Kalgoorlie.

If the rental agent was surprised to see them back so soon, he didn't show it. They exchanged paperwork, returned keys, then left the building quickly. Hot wind and grit from the mines on the edge of

town swirled around them and the cooler air of the aircraft terminal brought a welcome relief.

The fixed rows of hard plastic seats were mostly empty. A few people were dotted about, keeping to themselves. A woman was chastising a young boy who wanted to run around, while she wanted him to just sit. The woman gave up and the kid took off to examine the colourful vending machines along one wall. A lone person with a grey hoodie in the middle of a back-to-back seat cluster was engrossed in a newspaper. The two dropped into a couple seats in the next aisle. High up on the wall a large screen indicated that their next flight was about one hour away.

Alex briefly held Tessa's hand and turned to face her. "Thanks for joining me on this one. Maybe the trip was a wasted effort, but I have appreciated having you along."

She smiled. "It's ok. I was the one who set the wheels in motion in the first place. I'm just as determined to see it through as you are. It's such a shame that West Wyalong is a damned long way from everywhere."

She fell silent. After a few moments there was a quiver and squeak in the seating as the person in the row behind shifted their weight.

A womans voice with a strong Australian accent intruded. "Excuse me, did you just say you were heading for *West Wyalong*?" She pulled back the hood and they saw the face of a middle-aged woman with heavy pockmarked scaring on one side.

Chapter 22

Alex and Tessa looked at each other, but Alex spoke first. "Would I be right in thinking that your name is Karen? Karen Stinson?"

The surprise was palpable. "Er... yes, but I don't know you. I don't think we've met." Her voice was clear and easygoing. A lifetime of bar room work had seen to that, but she radiated caution with these two strangers who knew her name.

Alex took the plunge to give reassurance. "To tell you the truth, we've been looking for you for some time. We just tried at the hotel and they said you'd left yesterday. It's ok. There's no trouble." He added cautiously. "Mia, your friend in New Zealand sends her regards." Upon hearing this name her surprise stepped up another notch. "Please, come round this side of the seat. We have a bit to talk about."

Karen accepted their suggestion and placed herself in an empty seat, a safe distance opposite the two strangers. She was wanting to know more, but wanted a bit of space as well. Alex noticed that the newspaper she held was the same as the one he'd read a few days earlier about the reopening of the old cinema.

It was not the introduction that they had expected, but they'd have to make the most of it. Tessa suppressed her elation and waded into the conversation. "Karen, My name is Tessa Rathdown, this is Alex Kingbridge." She waved a hand in introduction. "I believe you knew his father at one time. Ben Caslow." She paused briefly to let this information sink in, but kept going before Karen had a chance to

reply. "I'm from a Melbourne law firm that represents Ben's estate as sadly, Ben passed away some time ago. We asked Alex here to help find you. It hasn't been an easy task."

She held a hand briefly to her scarred face and stated the obvious. "Yes I'm Karen. I guess there's not much point in denying it." She lowered her hand and clutched at the newspaper before her. Her face distorted with emotion and a single tear made a journey down her right cheek. "I... I read this article about the *Grand* finally opening and thought that just maybe Ben would be there. I wanted to see him again. I have to go there. I couldn't really afford to do it, but I have to be there."

A lifetime of disappointment and pain caught up with her and additional tears followed.

Alex offered a tissue from a small pack he carried. "Ben was my father, he never knew about me and I never had the chance to meet him myself, but I'm picking up some of the pieces about his life. We're heading back to West Wyalong now. It would make sense if we travelled together. We have much to talk about. We think we can help you."

"I only knew Ben for a few months and that was a long time ago. I never knew so much energy in a person, before or since. He was larger than life, but he was also a roller coaster. One moment full of talk about the future and what might be. Next something would swing his mood and he would go sad and silent for a while." She wiped her eyes and smiled, despite the intensity of old memories. "Don't get me wrong. His leaving when the cinema failed was

probably doing me a favour. I don't think I could ever live with a person of that intensity, Still, after all these years, I missed him. I don't know if he felt the same. Does that make any sense?"

Tessa sighed. Yes. It does. I'm sure you did mean a lot to him and he didn't forget. Karen, I want you to look at this..." She reached into her carry bag extracted a document folder, reversed it and held it out for her to see. Clipped to the front sheet was a bank draft made out to Karen Stinson for one million dollars. "There are some probate documents for you to read and some settlement signatures required, but this money is yours. We can go over this in more detail when we get back to West Wyalong."

"Oh my..." the tears restarted. "Oh my... Is this for real?" The two nodded in unison.

A brief announcement sounded over the PA inviting travellers to board the pending flight to Perth.

"Come on Karen, We both have stories to swap, but they can wait a little longer."

They gathered bags, flashed boarding passes to a man stationed at the terminal gate and made their way to the boarding ramp.

Chapter 23

Once back in West Wyalong, the three returned to the motel and Karen took a room of her own. The choice of accommodation turned out to be quite convenient given its proximity to the old theatre.

They waited until the following morning before meeting once more, as the previous day had been a long one for everyone. Tessa explained in detail what was involved with settling the inheritance. Karen signed the necessary documents and the bank cheque was handed over.

Tessa provided some words of advice. "You need to park this in a bank account as soon as possible, but then you have choices to make that are entirely your own. A windfall like this sometimes doesn't last long. Friends and relatives have a habit of showing up with zany ideas that sound reasonable, but often fail. Please don't invest in somebody else's project unless you have direct involvement, and even then, get some independent advice on its viability first. Better yet, don't tell too many people about it and keep a low profile."

With this titbit absorbed, she continued: "The second temptation is to blow a lot of it on expensive items, just because you can. Within a month or two, owning a \$150,000 car won't make you any happier than a \$50,000 car."

She glanced at Alex, then added "...or in some cases, a \$500 car"

Karen nodded and could see the logic in this. "Apart from a few small items, I'm in no hurry to spend any of it yet."

"That's a good thing." Tessa replied. "There's a really good case of putting a lot of it in a long-term investment. This would give you a useful income each year for the rest of your life. Just be aware that the more that you spend bits of the principal, the smaller your annual return becomes."

Not knowing Karen well, Tessa didn't know how long this advice would last, but at least she'd made an effort to steer her in the right direction.

"Speaking of investments 'Alex' when *are* you going to do something about that mongrel of a car you've been driving forever. Surely you've run out of excuses to keep it around, or am I interfering with some kind of private relationship you've got going?"

He released a long sigh. "No, you're right of course. It's old and in pain. Just give me a little time. I'll change its oil, then take it into some bushland with a rifle and a shovel. Afterwards I'll have a little cry and go out in search of something with central locking."

He feigned rubbing a tear away from his eyes with the back of his hand.

Then he sat up sharply and brightened visibly. "Well, that's all dealt with. Who wants ice cream?" He thrust his own hand in the air. The

two women looked at each other, shrugged, then slowly put their hands up as well.

West Wyalong may be a remote highway town, where the things that people want are often not to be had, but ice cream is not one of them. There were three ice cream shops in the town, with the closest outlet next door to a pub, just a short distance away. It was a simple matter to select a waffle cone of choice and settle around a faux cast-iron table on the street out the front of the building. Not much was said until they had all gone past the critical drip and melt-down-the-back-of-the-hand stage.

Alex turned to Karen: "What do you think you will do with yourself now? A financial boost can be a real life-changer, but only if you want it to be."

She looked between the two and described what she'd been thinking about. "I'm pretty much over bar work for a while and I'm certainly over Coolgardie. While I'm in town here, there's a few old friend's I'd like to look up. Of course I want to spend some time with Beth at the nursing home. I certainly owe her that."

I'm still keen to be here for the re-opening of the cinema. That's only a few days away and I wouldn't want to miss it. Afterwards, well, I'd really like to get back to Wanaka for a while and figure out what to do from there."

Alex agreed that it sounded like a good plan. The upcoming relaunch of the old cinema was the big buzz of the town. He'd heard that plenty of locals liked the idea of now having a movie house to visit

whenever they felt the urge. It was an attraction for both young and old in an otherwise quiet town.

Alex was looking forward to the movie itself. He hadn't seen *Back to the Future*, or its sequels for quite some years now, but his memory of it had always been a guilty pleasure. He wasn't going to miss out on this occasion. Tessa had announced an intention that she too would stick around for the show, which was another prospect that he relished. After that, well, there was that list of towns with staircases to revisit and see what else can be done, but that of course, was all next week's problem.

Chapter 24

As the *Back to the Future* end credits began to roll to the booming guitar of Huey Lewis, the audience clapped with vigour. Although it was now thirty years since its creation, the screening of the movie had become a larger success than the organisers had dared to hope for. Still, the crowd was not simply applauding the end of an iconic movie, they were honouring the efforts of the many local volunteers who had brought the old theatre back to life.

It had been tight, but the completion of the staircase, Maggie's large mural and other building works all met the anniversary deadline of October 21.

Centre-front in the cinema balcony sat Alex, Tessa, Clive and Karen Stinson, where they clapped with the same passion as the rest of the audience. When the curtain closed at the end of the show, the

projector was shut down and the house lights returned to full brightness. A large space was cleared in front of the screen and transformed into a party area for council dignitaries and volunteer workers involved with the project. Food and drinks were laid out and rapidly consumed by the crowd. Some took their wine and plastic plates back into the stalls where they sat talking in small groups, but the remainder simply stood and circulated as whim dictated.

The group of four from the balcony were among these. To her delight, Alex had shown Karen her name carefully preserved at the base of the staircase, the action of which had started a long chain of events that had brought them all together on this day.

The entire stair had been carefully illuminated by the house lights and looked magnificent. Karen held the handrail with care and affectionately recalled the last time she had done this, so very long ago.

A renewed round of applause erupted when two strong volunteers carried Nate Marlowe down the stair from the projection room, with a third carefully conveying his wheelchair behind them. During the screening Nate had been in the booth with the new film crew, in his words, '*making sure they bloody well did it right*', but now he was very much the man of the moment.

Once settled back in his chair, Karen pressed forward to give him a prolonged hug and more applause ensued. A little embarrassed, Nate nonetheless enjoyed his moment of attention, then complained loudly that he wasn't yet holding a beer.

Most of the guests returned to their small groups and a dozen conversations at once again filled the air.

A loud and accusing voice cut through the noise. "Alex Kingbridge... You sir, are a difficult man to find!"

Alex turned to follow the source of this intrusion and saw a man in a dark, well turned out suit. At first he didn't recognise the new arrival, but there was something in the voice...

The man grasped Alex's hand and pumped it enthusiastically. "I had a beard when we last met, not to mention a pretty banged up arm."

"Bill!... What the hell are you doing here?" Alex addressed the pilot he'd rescued a forgotten number of weeks ago with incredulation, and was quite bewildered at his presence here on this gala night.

Bill openly addressed the equally confused group around Alex. "This is the bloke who saved me from falling to a grizzly death or being burned alive when my plane struck a mountain. He damaged his car in the rescue and then drove me to hospital. I've been trying to locate him ever since."

The rest of the group didn't know what to say to this new development and simply fell silent.

Alex seized the pause. "So, you got better then? You didn't look too flash the last time we met."

"This is true. But then you disappeared. It was like you didn't exist. We looked for quite a while. Then one of my researches spots your name in a West Wyalong newspaper and we figured you'd be here tonight. You see I never really had the chance to introduce myself properly I really wanted to thank you for what you did back there. I'm Bill Sacheff." He reached out a mended arm to shake Alex's hand.

"I suppose you were a bit distracted at the time." Alex introduced Bill to the small group who then made a point of shaking each of their hands in turn.

When it was Tessa's turn, she asked him a question. "Ahh...would you somehow be linked to William Sacheff, the mining guy?"

"Well, yes, I do a bit of mining work."

Alex caught a look in Tessa's eyes. She wanted to tell him that the person before them was one of the wealthiest men in the country, but Alex had a new question of his own.

"So Bill, when we first met, you told me you had another aircraft. I hope it works better than the last one I saw you with."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure of that. Actually it's a jet. Look Alex, when I said I wanted to find you to thank you, it was more than just that handshake. I have something else." Bill reached into the pocket of his jacket and withdrew a bulky key fob and handed it to Alex. "I felt

bad that you damaged your car in trying to help me out and I wanted to do something about it. You seemed to like utility vehicles, so there's a new one parked out front that matches this key. With thanks from me and my family."

Alex smiled. The day seemed to be getting more unreal, but by now he was just content to go with the flow. "Well, thank you Bill, that's quite unexpected.... And really, also quite unnecessary. It was simple chance that I just happened to come along when someone needed a little help."

Bill shook his head in firm denial. "No, you're wrong. Maybe it was chance that you were on the road that day, but not one in a hundred would have got me out alive the way you did."

He approached and clasped Alex's shoulder. Alex wasn't used to such familiarity, but Bill was very sincere in conveying his gratitude. "Please understand that this gift, this car is just a token. I want you to remember that maybe one day you'll find yourself in trouble with nowhere to go. If that ever happens, you call me. Right? I mean it." He produced a crisp, purple business card with just his name and a company logo on it. On the back, Bill carefully wrote down a mobile number, then presented it to Alex with some emphasis.

"There are about eight people in the world that I will accept a direct call from. So now you're the ninth."

Alex accepted the card and Bill jovially slapped him on the shoulder once more. "You look after that now." He frowned and thought of something extra. "Oh yeah... I have to ask you about something. I

remember you took some pictures with your phone. What happened to them?"

Alex scratched his head and pulled his phone from a pocket. "Nothing happened. I just left them in here somewhere." He flicked through a gallery of recent images, brought it up on the screen and handed the unit to Bill.

It showed the stricken Bill with his back to the post, while behind him a crumpled pile of metal was strewn on the road between a vertical drop and an old ford pressed against a rock face. He breathed out slowly and held the phone at arms length for the others to see, then went into an arm-waving description of what he remembered about the rescue. "Alex, you've got to send me a copy of this."

"Come on Bill." Alex pleaded. "You're making me out to be some kind of superman. It was just a thing...."

The rest of the group were with Bill when they too saw the images.

Tessa spoke for all of them. "Oh wow. That's just so scary!" Then she looked at Alex. "Jeez you're a dark horse. I was reading about that crash when you first came into my office and you never said a word."

Clive added "It also explains why you've got sandwich wrap covering the window in your car."

"Yeah, well...I was going to get it fixed, but I've been a bit busy lately." He strove to change the subject. "Anyway Bill, I think it's about time we offered you a refreshment and show you around."

Glasses were topped up and the group migrated back to the staircase to admire its magnificence yet again. Karen raised her glass in salute. "This one's for Ben. He's not here today, but he's still been able to change our worlds." There were animated nods of agreement and drinks were taken in unison.

A short time later later, Bill announced that his own car was waiting and he had to leave. Alex was instructed that he could find his gift out in the street just by getting out there and working the button on the key fob. More hands were shaken. Promises of future contact were made and the surprise visitor departed as quickly as he had arrived.

Clive was the first to speak after this remarkable episode. "Well it looks like young Alex here has pretty much pulled a thorn from the proverbial lion and has now earned the eternal gratitude of an influential man. Lucky you."

Alex tucked the card into his wallet. "Well, I'm used to looking after myself, so I can't imagine ever having to use this."

Tessa scoffed in merriment at this. "You never know... One day you may fall down a well with a broken leg and you'd kick yourself if

you'd left that card behind somewhere....At least you'd think about kicking yourself if it wasn't already broken."

After the laughter had died down, there was a lapse in conversation. Clive announced that he had some people to see, bade a small farewell then wondered off. At this, Karen indicated that she was tired and would head back to her room. This left Alex and Tessa by themselves for the first time that evening. They quietly sipped their drinks and soaked in the atmosphere of the night.

Finally it seemed that the evening would wind down of its own accord. Alex had taken his fair share of ale and concluded that he'd passed the point where he would be taking a car anywhere, new or otherwise.

He and Tessa were then approached by a short, middle-aged man clutching at a glass of white wine. He'd seen this guy wandering around the room for some time and thought little of it.

The man had a round, red face and a few long strands of hair swooped over a balding head. Looking at him, Alex experienced a *deja vu* moment, as he was looking at a living replica of Mr Spacely from the old *Jetsons* cartoons. The man stopped before the couple and appraised Tessa with a long, undressing gaze.

He spoke with a pinched nasally voice. "I haven't seen you two around our town before, what do you do?" The question had been directed at Tessa, but his attitude annoyed Alex because he hadn't even bothered to introduce himself.

So Alex intervened, smiled at him and tilted his head at an odd angle. "I'm a purveyor of strange and exotic objects that have never before existed. Tell me, what's your star sign?"

Tessa coughed to suppress a giggle, recalling a previous conversation where Alex had described his special method for dispensing with unwanted guests.

The man frowned and quickly shook his head. "Err, no. What? Say, I just spotted somebody that I need to see." And gruffly added: "Please excuse me." Quickly he disappeared back into the crowd.

Out of the corner of her mouth Tessa snickered and held his arm close. "Meanie. I don't think you noticed, but I believe that you've just pissed off the Mayor."
