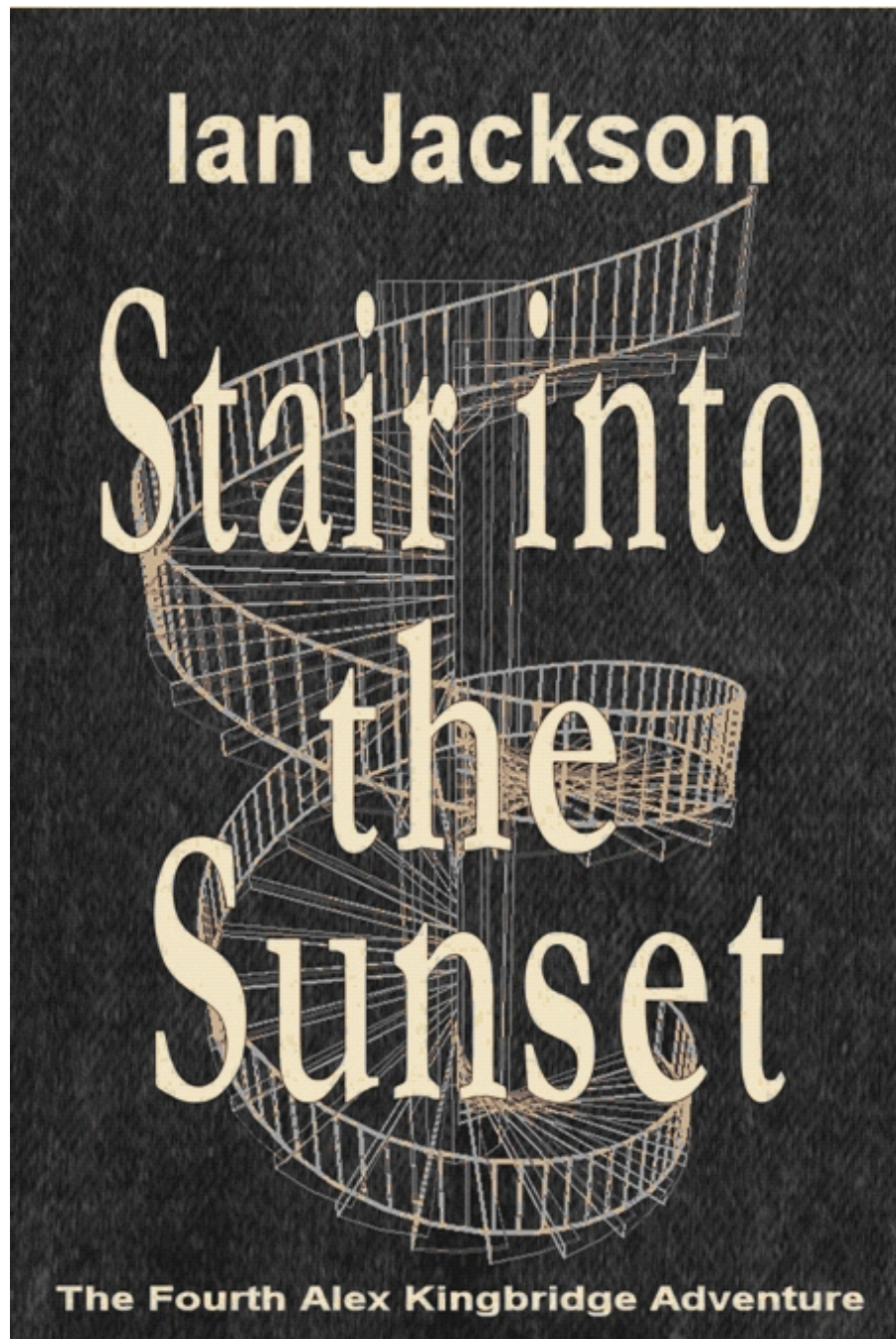


Ian Jackson



Stair into the Sunset

The Fourth Alex Kingbridge Adventure



Stair into the Sunset

By Ian Jackson

Synopsis:

At 33, Alex Kingbridge was doing okay. From simple beginnings, he embarked on a series of adventures, following the trail of a deceased father whom he had never met. Along the way he discovered wealth, unknown family and now a wife – none of which he ever thought would happen to him. Still, there were large gaps that he wanted to fill in his knowledge about his father that he wanted to fill. His journey of discovery was more successful and more peculiar than he could imagine. The clues lead him directly to one of the world's most remote locations and one of Australia's most closely guarded secrets.

Alex was about to embark upon his greatest adventure yet.

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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 it's just a sad coincidence and I apologise in advance.

Chapter 1

Ben Caslow balanced his ancient edition of the Adelaide street directory on his lap as he approached the outskirts of the city. He'd picked the book up during his last visit – probably in the early 70's, which made it 25 years out of date. Still, being Adelaide, not a great deal would have changed. Ben was still nursing the same FC Holden ute, he'd used on that last visit. This also reminded him that he needed to pump the brakes for the steep descent from Mount Barker to the city proper, just as he did all those years ago.

It seemed like a good time to find what stations could be heard on the wireless. Ben still regarded his push-button AM radio as a *wireless*, because it felt like the right word for it. The radio was also a cassette tape player, but in the absence of owning any tapes, it was a dormant feature. None of the five station buttons were tuned for South Australia, so Ben went directly to the tuning knob, dragging the little red pointer across the dial on its squeaky string. Reception had been poor since the antenna snapped on a low-hanging branch almost a year ago. Back then he'd bent a coat hanger roughly into a map of Australia and thrust it into the broken stub. It seemed to suffice for general listening, or at the very least, he'd become accustomed to its limitations.

The first station had some unknown (or at least unknown to Ben) African-American woman trying to wail out her entire vocal range on each syllable. Wailing was the right word for that too. Maybe it was a fresh hit for 1995, but that didn't make it good. The next station on the dial had a bland promo declaring that they only played Golden Oldies, then cued up the Duran Duran Bond theme, *A View to a Kill*. Ben always had a soft spot for Bond movies. He let it roll. Not really what he regarded as a Golden Oldie, but maybe it was appropriate music for a journey to an Air Force base on the far side of this States capitol, Adelaide.

For probably the hundredth time, he wondered what this summons was all about. He'd been tidying up after doing some small jobs at his Bruny Island workshop in Tasmania, a place which he'd simply regarded as 'The Farm', when a shiny SUV climbed the hill from the track and parked next to the shack. The farm was very secluded, making any visit an unusual event. A suited man had stepped from the car and approached the doorway where he stood and watched.

"Are you Ben Caslow?"

Ben was surprised both by this person's ability to find his remote property in the first instance, and again by him knowing who'd be living here. He composed himself. "Who wants to know?" It was a terse, if not impatient, reply.

"I'm Group Captain Morris Ames of the RAAF" The man had smiled and held out a business card that reflected the same information,

then offered a handshake. His hair was styled into a sharp military cut and the smile appeared genuine.

The card was gingerly accepted. He looked at it, thumbed a corner and returned his gaze to the new arrival, responding in cautious, neutral tones. "Okay, so you've found me. What's happening?"

"I must admit that you are not an easy man to locate Mister Caslow. However, I do have a serious proposition for you. May we sit somewhere?"

Ben indicated that he be followed into the main shed and stepped between two stacks of sawdust encrusted timber about waist high. Sitting on one, Ben gestured that the visitor ought to follow suit on the other. If this bothered the man, he didn't show it.

"Getting right to the point Mister Caslow, you have a reputation for specialised staircase construction. Maryborough council offices, a West Wyalong theatre, some private residences. A pagoda. Yes I've done my homework and have a fair understanding of your capabilities."

"Just call me Ben. What do you want?"

The Air Force needs your help. We are in a position to offer you a lucrative contract where you could probably name your own price

for..."

Ben cut him off short. "One million dollars, plus materials."

"I haven't yet said what the job is, but we can probably accommodate your price if..."

"You agreed too fast. Now it's two million."

"Look Mister... Ben, you don't yet know about the job or the conditions surrounding it. I can't discuss it here." He held out a second card. This one had an address on it. RAAF Base, Elizabeth, South Australia. Below this was a meeting date and time, for one week hence, almost to the minute. "I'm asking you to attend a meeting where you'll be able to learn the details. I can't give them to you here."

"That's a long way to go for a meeting. How will you be paying for my time and expenses?"

The question did not faze the visitor, who slowly placed his hand within his jacket and withdrew a thick envelope. "There's two thousand dollars here if you agree to attend the meeting, no strings."

This visitor was putting the onus back onto him to respond, using curiosity as bait. It worked. Ben scratched his nose and pretended to think about it for a few moments before replying. "Alright Group Captain Morris. You have purchased a small amount of attention. I'll attend this little shindig. I hope you're not going to waste my time. Who do I see?"

The visitor stood. Obviously not intending to stay any longer than necessary. "Just arrive at the Base gatehouse at that time and show them my card. I'll send someone for you." With that, he retraced his steps to the car and started the engine, the visitor lowered his window and spoke loudly. "Ben, this is a great opportunity for you serve your country and make some good money at the same time." Ben grunted a sound that could have meant anything, but added nothing more. Deciding that there was nothing to be gained by small talk, the visitor departed with the same haste he'd exercised for his arrival.

Seven days later Ben was mixing with Adelaide traffic, but still on time. Elizabeth was on the far side of the city. The flat, dry fields became more prevalent and somewhat desolate. One final roundabout delivered Ben to a gatehouse with an ominous looking tank parked on the left and a grounded jet on the right. Unnecessary symbols punctuating that this was indeed a military base.

A uniformed guard stepped out and addressed the driver's window of the old Holden. After a rapid wind-down, Ben passed over the card he'd been supplied. The guard glanced at it and directed him to an adjacent parking bay. Nothing happened for 20 minutes. Ben wondered what the repercussions would be if he simply turned and left. It felt like a pivotal moment which could change his future, one

way or the other. A 50-50 situation. He fidgeted with his car keys while a corner of his brain whispered *You don't need this crap, just put the keys in and leave*. Before these thoughts coalesced into action, an olive green Commodore pulled up from the opposite direction, window-to-window. The driver lowered the glass, inviting Ben to do the same. The man had blue eyes, fair skin and close cut ginger hair with an equally ginger moustache. Such a complexion no doubt made him vulnerable to any direct sunlight. He asked to see Ben's driver's license. When Ben obliged, the man grunted and barked "Follow me" before reversing back into the compound. Ben's escort wove his way between a rambling network of buildings and barracks before coming to a halt outside a low structure simply marked 'Operations'. Ben parked without bothering to lock any doors and followed his guide into the foyer. The next instruction was a terse "Wait here" and the soldier disappeared into the bowels of the building.

At a long desk facing the entrance, a woman perhaps in her early thirties sat discretely tapping away at a keyboard. She was immaculately dressed in pale and navy blues of air force uniform. Her mouse-brown hair was spiralled artfully into a tight bun. Eyes briefly flicked up at the intrusion, but her typing continued unabated.

Ben dropped into a soft vinyl couch that backed on to the wall and slowly settled into it. The cushion was inflated and released its air slowly, which produced an annoying sinking sensation. As he slowly dropped, Ben used this moment to quietly contemplate the woman. Her jaw line was sharp, giving a determined, competent aura. He found the combination attractive. Then again, he found most women attractive.

Her eyes flicked up again at Ben and confirmed to her that she was being watched.

Ben smiled. "How do you do it?"

The typing paused. "Do what?"

"Work here with all these military stiffs prancing about, always trying to figure who in the room has the biggest dick."

She smiled back, seemingly impervious to his directness. "To be honest, it helps that I don't have one. The stiffs mostly ignore me and I get more work done."

"So the pretend soldiers come and go, ignore you, telling you nothing, but you're still expected to know everything that's happening? That's harsh."

She tilted her head to one side, contemplating his words. "Mostly true, but somehow I still get to pick up on a few details... Mister Ben Caslow of Tasmania."

Her direct use of his name made him grin. "You have an advantage over me." He stood and reached across the desk, offering a

handshake. This was briefly accepted in a warm, but firm grasp that Ben appreciated. "Should I be calling you Miss Money Penny?"

"Hell no. I'm much better than her." She held her winged name badge between thumb and forefinger which clearly said Angela Parkes. "Since you're a civilian, you may address me as Angela."

"Well Angela, it's nice to meet you. Do you know why I'm here? I seem to be somewhat out of the loop so far."

"Yes. I do know exactly why you're here, but apparently, if I told you, I'd have to kill you. It's best that you meet your designated 'stiff's' in the conference room and get the story direct from them."

"Fair enough. A different question then. Since I know nothing about you. What do you know about me?"

She lifted her hands from the keyboard and leaned back in her chair. "Well now. I must admit your case was somewhat of a challenge. You sometimes live at Bruny Island, but move around a lot. You're a specialist carpenter who builds staircases from wood. You only take on work that holds some personal appeal. You have an irrational dislike for dealing with the 'establishment', or persons in authority." She punctuated the word with arched fingers in each hand. "You were almost arrested during the Franklin River protests, but fled the state before it was served. Oh, and you have a flirtatious reputation with women of all ages."

"Mmm. You're wrong about my irrational dislike of the establishment. It's not irrational dislike if I have good reasons for it." Ben sat comfortably on the corner of Angela's desk, getting into the swing of the conversation. "So...I don't know how long I'll be in town. Is there any chance I can see more of you?"

"You'll have to be more specific. Am I wearing too many clothes, or do you hope to meet me more often?"

"Hmm... a little from column A and a little from column B. We could start with one and progress to the other, in no particular order."

The phone on the reception desk rang intrusively. Angela picked it up, listened for a moment, said "Right." and returned the handset to the cradle. Her hands lay idly in her lap and she smiled again.

"Well Ben, it looks like the stiffs are ready for you now. Just take the left hallway and find the third door on your right. A man of your talents should have no problem finding it. I'll give you a clue. It has the words '*Conference Room*' printed on the door."

He stood up. "Well then Angela. We can pick this up at another time and I'll prise out a bit more about you. Level the playing field so to speak."

"We'll see. I like my home town advantage just fine." She dismissively gestured to the hallway and returned her attention to screen and keyboard.

Group Captain Ames was standing in the open doorway when he reached the conference room. He shook Ben's hand with the same enthusiasm as the week before and spoke as though they were life-long friends. It seemed more than a bit presumptuous.

"Great to see you made it okay. Come in and sit down."

They entered the conference room. It had an extremely long table and sufficient chairs for about twenty people. Only two were occupied. Both by middle aged professional military men wearing complex insignia which meant nothing to Ben, but their uniforms differed significantly. On the table next to them were two short piles of documents and a pen. Ben was offered a seat opposite the two men and Ames occupied the spot alongside Ben. It seemed like a strategic choice, as if to say the senior officers were adversaries, but it was fine, because friendly Ames was still on his side. Were they going to play good-cop-bad-cop with him?

Ames made introductions. "This is Marshall Wethers of the RAAF and Marshall Neely of the RAF. Sirs, this is Mister Ben Caslow." He then fell silent.

Wethers took point. "So I'm told that you build staircases."

Despite his pleasant interaction with Angela in reception, he felt that it was appropriate to play a little hard ball here. "I build specialised staircases from wood. What's up? Am I being accused of something?"

It was Neely's turn to speak. He had a strong, posh English accent. "You have done nothing wrong. However we do have a great need of your services."

"Okay, I'm missing something. I don't have a monopoly on construction and surely you have your own engineers and welders who can build anything you need. *Why am I here?*"

The two officers nodded imperceptibly at each other, then looked at Ames who gave a small nod in return. It seemed to Ben that he'd walked into some form of minimalist nodding contest.

Ames broke the silence. "We'd like to tell you exactly what we need, but every part of our work here is highly classified. We need you to sign these Official Secrets Act documents." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Once that is done we can say more, but you must be aware that should you sign these documents and speak of our work to anyone not on the approved list, you may be jailed." He picked up the pen from where it lay on the first document and held it out to Ben.

Chapter 2

Alex, who had spent his life largely in isolation, was completely unprepared for the complexities of his own marriage. He proposed to Tessa a week after his return from China. She said "Yes". She immediately lamented that Brian in the office won the sweep because he'd guessed that Alex would make his move about seven days after coming back. Most of the crew felt that he was probably going to move slower than that. Along with the engagement announcement, they gave a wedding date projection of three months hence.

As with most marriage proposals, the 'yes' was the easy part. It gets harder when trying to decide upon *when it will happen*, *where* it will happen and *who* to invite. A celebration in Melbourne was obvious, as this was where most of Tess's friends lived and worked, but this location was rejected on the grounds of being too predictable. They settled on a plan for a lavish outdoor ceremony at a Hobart venue. Thus making the event equally inconvenient for practically everyone.

As for the 'who', a large contingent from the law firm *Bloomfield & Close* flew South to watch Tessa and Alex take their vows. Work at the law firm was pretty much suspended for the event.

Alex wanted his newfound friends and family to share his big day. Karen Stinson had been a target of his first investigation. She was keen to attend. Still living in New Zealand, Karen arrived at the reception centre with her partner Mia. When Karen received her share of Ben's inheritance, she and Mia proceeded to renovate of their lakeside home at Wanaka. They presented a gift of two New Zealand woollen jumpers with colourful bands and silhouettes of black sheep. Each was thick enough to make an Eskimo sweat.

The reception centre had a staging area where guests could mingle and chat. Smartly dressed serving staff circulated with plates of treats and crustless sandwiches. Still early in the day, Tessa wore a sheer, ivory coloured evening dress, incapable of concealing anything more prominent than pocket lint. With Alex by her side, they greeted their guests with enthusiasm. Alex was introduced to a procession of Tessa's fellow workers from the law firm, but struggled to recall their names mere minutes after their presentation.

Helena Kempthorne of Strahan was invited, but did not respond. An invitation had also been extended to Alex's Franklin River travelling companions. Barry, Beanie and Woz. This trio was of course eager to attend. They jointly presented a peculiar gift. Carefully nestled in a carton of foam chips was the broken off tip of a fibreglass kayak, elegantly mounted on a rectangle of native pine. At its base was a small engraved plaque with a cryptic message; *To Tessa and Alex from the Franklin River trio – Every past adventure is merely preparation for the one that hasn't happened yet.*

Alex laughed and proclaimed that this memento would be going straight to the pool room, even though he possessed no such place.

Another guest they were happy to see was the Hobart journalist, Jamie Litchfield. He'd been responsible for breaking the bombshell story about the cold case murder of Helena's mother. Jamie had progressed to become a solid friend and the couple had been honored to be present at the big night where he'd earned a Walkley Award for his presentation of that story.

Mei-Hua and her son Ben, were early arrivals. Ben was Alex's half-brother and had been named after their father, Ben Caslow. Mei had mostly recovered from her eye surgery and was still revelling in the clarity of her restored vision. Mother and son had been staying at the Bruny Island property for the past three months. Young Ben, or *Xiaoben* as Mei like to call him, wanted to give something personal to the newlyweds that would also be a reminder of their extraordinary escape from China. Ben unveiled the product of many weeks work, a magnificent dragon of dark red wood, grasping a small carved ball in one claw - formed from a single billet of Tasmanian hardwood. Tessa hugged the young man affectionately. Other guests regaled the artefact with awe.

Karen was taken with the piece and addressed its creator directly. "This is magnificent Ben. How do you begin something like this?"

He chose his words with care. "I think about what I would like the finished result to be. Then I work back from there in my head until I define a block of wood that I must find to make it happen."

Karen nodded. "Your English is excellent. I understand that your mother taught you to read as well. That must have been difficult."

He smiled. "Yes, I only had the one story book to study. It is now falling apart from my over use, but I still keep it. The book was a story about some people in a time travelling car. It taught me to read. While it was difficult to understand, I believe it changed my life."

Karen's reaction was immediate. "You learned to read from *Back to the Future*? Where did that come from? There can't have been many western story books in your part of China."

Mei answered for him. "I was young, living in Townsville and had been secretly dating Ben Caslow for a few months when I was sent by my father to China. Looking back, I was pretty naive. I had only minutes to pack. Ben loaned the book to me as a good read. I remember he said it was important to him and not to lose it. I kept it in my travel bag lest my father found it. When I reached the family village in China, before Xiaoben was born, I discovered the book was still in my luggage. It was the only English book in the village." Mei was proud of her son's achievement. "Ben and I studied it together until he could read it out loud on his own."

The revelation stunned Karen. It was the tail end of a story that she had started. "I... I was with Ben Caslow in West Wyalong when he was building the staircase for an old cinema. He really wanted to finish the project in time for the launch of the *Back to the Future* movie. I found a copy of this book in the town bookstore and gave it to Ben Caslow a few days before everything was shut down and the project abandoned. I'm sure that this would be the same book!"

Some seconds passed while everyone absorbed this peculiar link between two women who had never met before.

Young Ben broke the silence with a perfectly enunciated; "Whoa...this is heavy."

At that moment, Bill Sacheff, the mining magnate and his wife Liz joined the group. Bill had previously contacted Alex and said that he was keen to buy the couple something nice, like a speed boat as a wedding gift, Alex had protested. "No Bill, you already brought me a car. It's too much. Bill had relented on the boat idea, but it had given him an idea. He pried open the pocket of Alex's suit and inserted an envelope with what he thought was the next best thing. Undated tickets for a ten-day Pacific Ocean cruise.

"After those weeks on an iron ore carrier, an ocean voyage on a *real* ship would be just the thing.

As the hour of the ceremony approached Alex had felt oddly detached and out of place. Wearing an immaculate navy blue suit, he felt as though he was an invited guest to someone else's big day. Of course he knew what was happening, but that it was happening to *him* still seemed surreal. This knot of trepidation evaporated the moment Tessa made her way down the aisle. All eyes followed her movements. She had changed and was now resplendent in a long, cream-white garment of many layers. Her hair rose in a lofty confection of curls that surely would have taken weeks to assemble. She wore the broadest of smiles, but fought off shivers as the cool Southern air passed through her outfit with the transparency of a fly screen. Tessa leaned in as they met before the celebrant and between chattering teeth whispered to Alex; "I'm freezing my ass off here! Whose idea was it to come to Hobart?"

Alex murmured a reply, not so loud that others could hear. "It'd be insensitive of me to answer that. Besides, maybe you feel cold, but from where I'm standing you still look pretty hot." She snorted a derisive sound, then shifted her focus to the celebrant, who had been artificially throat-clearing more than once to draw their attention.

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By the time the couple reappeared at the reception, Tessa had reverted to much more casual attire. Their New Zealand friends were pleased to find her thoroughly immersed within the new woollen jumper. Sheep and all. "Bugger the party fashion" Tessa declared. "This is the warmest I've been all day!"

Guests milled about. Tall glasses of bubbly were clinked and congratulations duly delivered. Bill Sacheff approached looking happy and relaxed in a well-worn suit. He placed his arms around the couple in both affection and support, as he'd made an early start on the refreshments. It was difficult to connect this ordinary looking fellow as being one of the wealthiest in the land. "Well kiddies, I've been looking forward to this bash. Mister and Mrs Kingbridge."

Tessa shook her head. "No, it's still Rathdown. As a lawyer, my name is on hundreds of court and legal documents. Changing it now would be a bloody nightmare."

"Oh." He shifted his gaze to Alex. "And you're fine with this?"

Alex shrugged, "Sure. We get twice as much junk mail this way, but yeah, why not?"

The couple worked the room, sharing handshakes and kisses. When all was done, they left the venue with much fanfare.

The following morning found the newlyweds jetting their way across the Tasman on a direct flight to Auckland, New Zealand. Alex had booked a lavish room at a small resort close to the Bay of Islands.

Their first week of marriage passed rapidly in a blur of salads, sex and sightseeing. While much of the country had a reputation for cool extremes, the weather at their latitude was quite balmy. Woolly jumpers and heavy jackets remained in the luggage. Shorts and T-shirts were all that was needed and sometimes, not even that.

The flight back to Melbourne only took a few hours. Alex held hands with Tessa on the arm rest and gazed out at the ocean below. It was a good time for contemplation. His thoughts returned to a conversation at their reception. He'd spoken with two of the senior partners at Tessa's law firm. They had cornered him with purpose. The firm had been impressed with his field work and suggested that from time-to-time there would be other investigations needing a reliable man in the field. It was an attractive prospect for a man of relative leisure. Alex had amassed a tidy sum and the prospect of conventional work held little attraction. Still, despite the settlements,

he felt that not all loose ends with his current mission were resolved. A void still existed.

Still looking through the tiny window, he expressed these thoughts out loud. "Something is still bugging me Tess. About Ben."

She examined him thoughtfully but remained silent.

"We've learned a lot about how Ben Caslow lived. His work has left an extraordinary legacy. But there's still a peculiar gap. After Ben left Townsville, he disappeared for a few years. We don't know where he went. Then he shows up at your law firm with huge lottery winnings to invest, while suffering the final stages of a terminal illness."

Tessa had a more pragmatic approach. "As a law firm, we take information from clients in good faith, or at least until evidence contradicts their story. With Ben we had no reason to suspect that what he told us wasn't true. As far as the firm is concerned, Ben's estate is now wrapped up and discharged. What more do you hope to find?"

"I really don't know what I'll find, but it's going to nag me if I don't check it out. From what I learned of the man, Ben Caslow wasn't the sort of bloke to stay home and do nothing. Something made him very sick, or maybe he'd still be around today. If it was genetic, then maybe it could affect me too."

He gazed out the window again. Far below the scattered cloud, there were specks of ships, only visible by the long wakes that trailed them in calm seas. "Two weeks ago I contacted all the big lottery companies operating in Australia. They are very cagey about privacy issues, but were happy to supply a negative answer. They all said that they'd never heard of a Ben Caslow. They had no record of anyone by that name winning prizes. When Ben first arrived at your law firm with a fist full of money, it wasn't from lottery winnings. It must have come from somewhere else."

He turned away from the window. The morning sun made a row of window shaped rectangles of light dance across the interior of the cabin as the craft banked slightly. "I've seen nothing to suggest that Ben was a crook in any of his dealings, but it's difficult to reconcile how he came up with around seven million dollars in just a couple of years, then lied about its source when he took it to your law firm for investment. I'm in two minds here. I want to know what really happened, but I also worry about what I might find."

Tessa had a magazine open but wasn't looking at the pages. "I never learned much from our records. There was the path of investment from his account to a managed Shares portfolio. There was the letter you've already seen with a short list of town names where he built staircases. You've been to all the places on that list. I don't know what else can be done."

"The answers will be out there, we just have to find them. When we get back to the farm I'll sift again through whatever notes we can dig up. Maybe there are workable clues. Any activity that made the windfall of money that Ben produced must leave some kind of a trail."

The flight brought the couple directly back to Hobart. Alex's large Ford had been parked near the terminal, but in the short time they'd been away, city dirt had dropped a dusty film over the roof and windows. He resolved to use the car wash on the road to Kettering, not far from the Bruny Island ferry terminal.

Much had changed since Alex's first visit to the Ben Caslow farm. On the Southern part of the island, a high plateau bordered an old growth forest. The only access was via a dead-end track that few people had reason to travel. After Alex had secured ownership of the property, he'd indulged in a flurry of activity. Boundary fences were renewed and the tall grass slashed. A dozen steers now ranged across the paddocks, keeping the abundant grass under control. Crushed rock fortified the original driveway into an all-weather path that extended to the buildings on the high point of the land. Two modern relocatable cabins had been trucked up the rise and deposited next to the original timber dwelling. Other changes included two large poly water tanks, a septic system and an array of solar panels. One of the new cabins had been taken up by Mei-Hua and her son. The sounds of Alex's big ford broaching the rise announced their return and Mei and Ben turned out to greet them.

It was a festive occasion. The mother and son were barely recognisable from the forlorn duo Alex had found in a poverty trap of a Chinese village not so many months earlier. Mei had prepared a small feast to celebrate their return. For the Chinese, fine food was about more than assuaging hunger. It was a symbol of success and prosperity. They sat around the table while Mei fussed about and dished up multiple courses. After dumplings came fried vegetables and chicken chunks, progressing to a specialty dish of spicy fried tomato and scrambled egg. This was served in Chinese tradition with all dishes placed in the centre of the table. There was enough food to easily feed twice their number.

Tessa was most impressed by the tomato-egg dish. "This is lovely May." She had fallen into the habit of using the English translation of her name. "Simple, yet tasty and very filling. You'll have to show me how you put this one together."

Mei beamed at the compliment. Her Australian-Chinese accent still fully evident. "You can't believe what a luxury it is to work with unlimited fresh ingredients. For years we've been surviving on tiny bits of whatever we could get, cooked on a single coal burner. This wonderful little kitchen here is a dream. When I started this morning, I only wanted to cook for the four of us, but couldn't stop."

Alex felt that she looked years younger than her former self during their first encounter. Her eyes were now clear of the opaqueness that had plagued her vision. Mei now radiated an energy that he'd not witnessed before. Alex voiced his observations. "You both appear to have settled down. I think that this quiet country lifestyle agrees with you. Ben, what have you been up to?"

Ben's English, while also accented, was almost flawless now. He wiped his chin on a tissue and looked across the table. "I have a room in Hobart and I stay there two nights each week while I study at the university. Ma drives me around. I'm still trying to achieve my own car license. Together we buy plenty of supplies and come back here for the rest of the week. I have started a small business to make specialty furnishings of my design. It would please me to show you what I am doing in the workshop."

Chapter 3

The afternoon was unrushed. There were still a few weeks of leisure before Tessa had to return to the reality of her workplace. It was a luxury to simply let the day unfold at its own pace. After the extended meal, at young Ben's prompting, their small group made their way into the open-sided shed to check things out.

Ben became quite chatty about his achievements since coming to Australia. "I've cleared some space for project work. Although most of the original equipment is still working, I've added some modern power tools."

Alex could see a new drill press, wood lathe and table saw. Next to this was a modern vacuum extractor for pulling sawdust and shavings into sacks. Centred in the workspace lay a freshly constructed dining table. It was round, a good two metres across, supported by five legs. Sanding was still in progress. Alex leaned back on a dusty stack of timber that looked like old tongue-and-groove floorboards.

His enthusiasm was palpable. "Ma and I have leased a shop front in Hobart. We are making a gallery of wooden furnishings. I can build these things and put them up for sale at my own pace for a good price." He smiled at Alex. "You were right. Here I can make my own future without wondering where my next meal will come from. It's more than a dream come true, because I didn't know that such living was possible when I lived in China." He beamed at his own accomplishments.

Tessa ran her hand over the surface of the table, which was a mosaic of several wood types of graduated grain density. This was original work that would sell for a small fortune in any of the bigger cities. "You have a talent for this Ben. Maybe it came from your father. I don't know. But I'm sure you'll do well."

This was a pivotal moment for Ben that extended beyond the carpentry. He wanted to share his thoughts. "Back in the village there was no interest in new ideas. People would tell me that I must just copy old ways and never, ever, do anything original. Ma's book, with Doctor Emmet Brown and his friend Marty, was just a story, but it showed me a different way of looking at things. Since coming to Australia, I find that many of the people I meet also think this way. People here love to create, not because they have to, but because they want to. I see this difference. I feel like this is my home."

Young Ben's outlook impressed Alex and he was pleased by what he had to say. Still, Alex had his own agenda to follow. His mission was to find out about the missing years of Ben Caslow and the source of his windfall. "Ben, with your work here, have you found any documents and notes from our father? I'm trying to find clues about how he spent his final years."

He shook his head in the negative. "Anything that looks like paper in these sheds has rotted away or was eaten by mice a long time ago."

"Have you looked in the old hut where Ben Caslow once lived?"

Again he shook his head. "No. Not properly. I heard the story about how you were bitten by a snake in that hut. I fear snakes, so I don't go in there much."

Alex stood from the stack he'd been leaning on. "Come for a walk."

Together they trooped into the old hut, now somewhere between rustic and derelict in contrast to the new modern cabins by its side. Alex was reminded that the interior was every bit as dim as his first visit. They congregated around the central table where a powerful LED lantern lay dormant. Alex activated the lamp and the room filled with light. Their presence cast large shadows on the walls. "Do you see anything unusual about this room?"

Ben peered around, then shook his head. "Plenty of dust and dead spiders. Maybe some not-so-dead spiders. What am I looking for?"

With a grin Alex recovered the winding tool, still sitting on the shelf where he had last left it. As before, he placed the device over the protruding bolt head and cranked the handle. The wall creaked, retracted and began to move to one side, exposing the narrow secret room behind the rear wall of the hut. "Ben would have wanted a secure storage for some of his valuables, as there would be long periods of time where the property was unattended."

The retracted wall revealed the dusty shelves, laden with boxes. Their contents were unchanged.

Young Ben was impressed by this revelation. He stared closely at the mechanism which drove the concealed panel. A series of coarse toothed cogs and cams worked in unison. Simple enough in principle, but cleverly executed in practice. A stark reminder that his father must have been a resourceful man.

Alex propped the lantern on a convenient noggin. "Grab as many of the boxes and paper rolls that you can carry. We'll take them back to my cabin. There's better light and we can spread them out."

The documents were divided between them and conveyed to the cabin in a single trip.

Tessa fussed with the kettle and coffee cups. The rolls of plans were unfurled and held flat with drink coasters.

Alex was forthright. "Most of these plans are pretty old. Today I'm looking for any notes or receipts that date back to Ben Caslow's final years."

There were two thin spiral-bound notebooks with red covers, but they were blank inside. It didn't look like they'd ever been used.

Tessa upended a box of receipts and began to sift through them. "There is a vehicle registration renewal here. Vic Roads, so it's for a car in Victoria, not Tasmania. May, when you first met Ben up in Townsville, what sort of a car was he driving?"

"Ahh... That was a long time ago. It was a ute, but I think it was a very old one, even for then. It was kind of light-blue. That's about all I remember."

"Okay. This is dated 1994. It's a renewal is for a 1959 FC Holden utility. That's a pretty ancient car, even in the 90's. It looks like Old Ben didn't update often. I wonder what happened to it."

The young Ben was looking hard at a receipt with penned handwriting on it. "I can't read this. The writing is strange and loopy, it's difficult for me to understand."

Tessa took it from him. A few years in the law firm had provided plenty of experience in dealing with outrageous writing styles. "It's odd. By the letterhead, it's from a car upholsterer in Moorabbin, Melbourne, but the handwriting says '*Parking fee, \$180, Regards John.*'" She looked up. "This is peculiar. Maybe we should check this one out."

Alex had recovered a bulldog clip holding a nest of old fuel receipts. They were a little faded, but still legible. "Old Ben was collecting his fuel dockets for some reason. Maybe for claiming reimbursement. What's a little weird is that these fuel receipts are all for lots of

different places in South Australia. They appear to be mostly from around 1996. I'm going to write them up and do some sorting by place and time. Maybe we'll find some patterns in his travels."

Mei had extracted a long document which grabbed her attention. It was a series of drawings of a staircase, but it was so long that it overflowed between sheets. When they were placed together it revealed a sketch for a continuous spiral with six turns. Alex could remember glancing at this item when he'd first discovered the secret room, but thought little of it at the time. The group gathered and held the sheets flat for a closer look. These were not official drawings, but working notes for a pending project. The bottom sheet had a faint pencil markings in a highlighted rectangle. Alex had to drop down and view the writing at a shallow angle to extract more contrast from the words. They were written in capitals. Alex spoke aloud. "It says '*TOWER 1996*'. What the hell is that all about?"

Chapter 4

While the military officers watched, Ben Caslow signed his name in three places, then handed the pen to Captain Morris, who proceeded to countersign the Witness portion of the document.

With the legal steps completed, the room fell quiet for a moment. Ben could not think of anything to add. It didn't bother him to sign the secrecy document, as he knew of no one who was interested in his work. Filling out the forms looked like being the only way he was going learn more about why they'd got him to drive halfway across the country.

Neely the Englishman must have been reading his thoughts. "Fine. We can now provide a bit more detail about the project. Then we'd like you to prepare a quote. Just be aware that as yet, we can't say what it's for or where it will be built. That'll come later if your quote is accepted. You have to understand that the job'll be in a remote location and that a big allowance must be made for travel time and for your continuous presence at the construction site."

"Alright then. What do you want built?"

The Australian officer waded into the conversation here. "We want a spiral staircase that rises up six levels to a large, flat top landing. No breaks."

"Hmm... That's...peculiar. I don't understand why you need me. Wouldn't you just contract a steel fabrication company to weld something up?"

The three officers did that thing again where they just nod and eye each other off for several seconds.

Neely came clean. "It's important that this staircase is made from wood. Entirely from wood. It can't have a single metal nail or screw in it. Can you do this?"

Ben scratched his head. "Oh." He hesitated and contemplated this bit of information. "So it's more than just non-magnetic, otherwise you'd let me use brass."

"That's correct, we can't use brass or copper, because while these metals can't be picked up with a magnet, they are still electrically conductive, so we can't use any metal at all."

"Got it." He contemplated the problem out loud. "What if we get high density plastic for screws and bolts? There are some pretty tough plastics with fibreglass additives."

Neely nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. That ought to be fine. The key requirement is that no materials capable of conducting an electric current can be used. Any bolts or brackets that you want to use must have samples sent in advance. We'll carry out a test. Actually, it is a simple test. We place materials in a microwave oven next to a glass of water and run it for a minute. If the water heats up, but the sample stays cool, the sample passes. If the sample heats up, it means that it's affected by radio energy and it can't be used. Do you understand?"

"Err..okay. I understand what you want. I don't understand *why* you want it, but that's fine – for now. I'll need to prepare a quote next. To do that, I want to see your specifications showing height, width, weight ratings – everything you have."

Neely shifted his attention to a nearby stack of documents. He withdrew a cluster of stapled pages and passed them to Ben. "This is

the spec. It's six pages long and it's classified. That means we need it back when you finish the quote. I should add that time is a factor here. This project must be operational in about eight months, so we're going to need the quote fast. Use your best estimates, but when in doubt quote high, because ingredients must be good quality and obtained quickly. Don't worry about transport. If parts can be sent to an Adelaide address, we'll handle materials delivery from the staging area to the project site."

He crossed his arms in an intimidating military stance and looked directly at Ben. "We'd like you to stay in town while you work this out. I want to meet you back in this room in three days and we'll examine your proposal."

Ben hadn't had much to do with military people. Mostly they were all too serious for his liking. Even if they had a sense of humour, they rarely laughed at the same things he did. Still, it sounded like a unique challenge and a well-funded one at that. One fact stood out. For them to have singled him out the way they had, would mean that they'd already exhausted the regular options. On that basis, he'd make the quote three times higher than his normal pricing and see what happens.

"Alright then gents. I'll see you here in three days." Ben stood and scooped up the classified spec sheets. "One more thing. Does this project have a name?"

"Yes. But be aware that the name is also classified. Just one word. The project is called TOWER."

Chapter 5

Two days had passed since Alex called the automotive upholstery company. They found it deep in Melbourne's South-Eastern sprawl. Alex and Tessa organised a flight back to Melbourne. Tessa's small car was still waiting at the long-term car park. They battled traffic for more than an hour before reaching a decayed industrial estate on the edge of Moorabbin. It had been on the urban fringe back when Melbourne was a much smaller city. Now it was ringed by up-market inner city housing. Probably valuable land, ripe for demolition and re-zoning. Some enterprises with nowhere else to go were holding out against such changes.

When Alex had called the company, the ring-tone had almost timed out before a croaky old-man voice came back with 'Yeah?'

"Hi my name is Alex Kingbridge. I'm looking for Customline Car Interiors. Is that John?"

"Yeah." The voice repeated. Apparently phone etiquette wasn't high on his agenda.

"I'm not sure if you can help, but my father was Ben Caslow and I found an old receipt from you about some car storage you did for him once. I wonder if you recall anything about that?"

"Yeah, well, tell Ben to come and collect his fucking car cos it's been taking space up here forever."

"What? His car is still there?"

"Yeah. It's covered in possum shit."

"I'm sorry but Ben won't be coming back for it. He died some time ago. I'd like to come and see this car. It's important."

"Okay... Yeah, but we'll have to work something out then, cos I don't want to leave it here an' he owes me more storage money."

"I'm sure we can help. I'll come visit you. I'm out of town just now, so it'll take me a couple of days."

"Orright, see you then." Alex wanted to thank him for the call, but the line had already gone dead.

Closing in on the destination, Tessa drove them down a narrow street, dodging parked cars and trucks. They found the matching factory number on an ancient cement-block building, spotty with

clumps and streaks of black algae. A sun-affected sign, barely readable, confirmed the company name. Rusty bars on opaque windows provided what was likely to be a false sense of security. The main roller door was down and mostly blocked with industrial waste bins. A smaller metal door was ajar and in obvious use.

The act of entering the factory was reminiscent of a Disney version of the descent into Aladdin's Cave. It was dark, dank and full of car seats in various stages of repair and disrepair. The walls were lined with long racks of dusty fabrics on cardboard rolls. The very definition of an old-school upholsterer. Some movement below a heavily diffused window caught Alex's eye. A human silhouette was leaning over a bench top, like a life-sized shadow puppet, busily working a prehistoric sewing machine.

The shadow spoke. "Can I help you there?" It was the same croaky voice.

"Yeah, it's Alex. We spoke on the phone. This is my wife Tessa." To Alex it still felt a little strange to use the *my wife* expression. Tessa smiled at that. In all likelihood, she was finding it just as odd.

The man came forth into better light. He was short, barely coming up to Alex's shoulders. He was old. So very, very old. His face was as dark and leathery as the fabrics that surrounded them. With a liveliness that belied his age, he grinned and held out a hand. "Ben's son eh? Damned if you don't look like 'im too. What happened to the ole bastard?"

Alex looked at Tessa and she gave a nod of confirmation. "Apparently cancer got him. That's what I heard. I never got to meet him. I'm trying to find out what he was up to in his last days. That's how I came across one of your receipts for car storage. I'm puzzled why his car would have been parked here."

"Yeah, well, there are reasons for that. For a long time I'd help him buy in and stitch up special carpet runners for his bloody weird staircases. My machine's tough enough for thick carpet work. We were kinda mates, though I suppose I never got to know him real well. He had a place down in Tassie and needed a spot in Melbourne to park his shit-heap between trips. The airport car parks were crazy expensive." He paused and scratched his left elbow with the other hand. It was conspicuously bony and twisted with arthritis. "I had a little bit more space back then and I'd let him park it here in the factory. When we caught up, I'd write up a bill for him. Beer money really. But a long time ago he never came back. It was parked here on the floor for most of a year, getting in the way. My son was taken with it and kept eying it off. He hoped that one day I'd let him get his hooks into it. These early utes are kinda rare now. I wouldn't let him take it but. I figured that if Ben ever showed up, he'd be right pissed if I'd given away his car."

Tessa intruded on the ramble, trying to bring him back to the point. "Where is the car now?"

He lifted his bony hand once more, pointing past Tessa to the corner of the factory. There was a brick toilet block and what was probably the lunch room, built from the same concrete cubes as the factory

walls. It was all filthy. On top of this structure the outline of a car could just be made out. Unmistakably an early Holden. It was just as filthy and partially concealed by old rolls of canvas and discarded cardboard cores.

"When we ran out of space, I picked it up with the forklift and shoved it up there."

Seeing Ben's car perched near the roof was daunting to Alex. A real Indiana Jones moment of archaeology. "Well bugger me!" was all he could squeeze out.

"If Ben's gone and you're his son, then I guess it's yours now."

This was not expected. Alex was chasing information and the car was just a means to source more clues. Probably the car had collector value, but it would need a lot of work to realise that value. Alex had no appetite for the task. He made a proposal.

"Look, we really just want to find what Ben was up to in his final years. If you'll let me go over the car looking for any paperwork or clues and let me keep what I find, then I'm happy for you, or your son, to keep the car. By now I reckon you've earned it."

The old man nodded. "Yep, I reckon I have. Okay. I'd be fine with that. I'll find some steps for you. But before you go, I'll need some kind of receipt to show that we didn't just pinch it."

Alex smiled and nodded. "We can do that for you."

The old wooden steps were pretty rickety. Its bottom rung was missing. It held together long enough for Alex and Tessa make it to the flat roof and navigate the limited space between the car and a three metre drop to concrete. The car itself was dark with filth, but when Alex passed a hand across the door, it exposed the same light blue colour that Mei had described of Ben's car in Townsville. This old bus had seen a lot of work in its time. The FC Holden was an Australian built car, loosely modelled on the larger American '55 Chev. The Aussie market was very big on utility vehicles back then. The FC ute was the car of choice for the farmer who'd had a good season, or the tradie with a lot of tools to move around.

Tessa was enjoying the mystery. "Have a look at this." In the rear of the ute, she shoved several cardboard fabric spools to one side and used her phone to illuminate the space below. Sand had built up in all of the corners. It was very fine and very red. It had that signature rust-coloured hue of the Australian outback. Tessa pointed to it. "You don't see sand like *that* in Tasmania."

Three rectangular boxes were strewn on the floor. Alex pried the lid from one, not knowing what to expect, but found packs of bolts. He picked up a handful. They were extremely light, cast from plastic. They looked familiar. He'd seen some of these fasteners on a pallet, back at the farm. It felt like an important clue, but right now, the significance eluded him. One of the unopened boxes was heavier. With the lid removed, a nest of wood shavings filled the space. From this he pulled a wine bottle, with its seal intact. The label was an

unusual one, from a South Australian vineyard. With a shrug, he returned it to the box and added it to the pile of items to be taken for further study.

Alex shifted his attention on the passenger side door. The driver's door was too close to the wall to be accessible. After some initial resistance the door creaked open. Inside was a little dusty and scattered with desiccated spider remains, but still cleaner than the rest of the car. Alex opened the glove compartment and pulled out some junk documents and a curled UBD street directory for Adelaide. Below this was a plastic cassette case, plain and unlabelled. He flipped it open and inside was a home-recorded tape with the words '*Spiral Starecase*' written in a flowery script quite divorced from his father's heavy handwriting. The other side was free of text. "Odd," Alex spoke aloud. "Why would Ben put stair designs on a cassette?" Without pausing for further assessment, he passed the bundle to Tessa. There was something else tugging at his attention. Screwed to the dashboard was a box with a screen. It looked like a fish finder normally found on boats, but Alex knew better. It was an early Magellan GPS. He'd seen these before on farms. They had crude aviation-style maps on black and white screens. Unlike the modern street navigators, these first generation boxes told you where you were through UTM coordinates – if you could pick up enough satellites. This was an exciting find and he knew it could still contain important data.

Returning briefly to the factory floor, Alex borrowed a screwdriver and wire cutters from his host. The unit had an external antenna connection that probably wired to the roof somewhere, but he simply unplugged the cable. It wouldn't matter if the navigator didn't currently know where it was. With luck, he'd find out where this thing had been. In short order, the device was free of the dashboard and added to the take-home pile.

Old John watched proceedings from the ground. He was quite happy to fetch the ladder for the couple, but wasn't keen to climb up there himself.

Alex placed the recovered items near the top of the ladder, where they could be reached during the descent. "I'm taking one of those boxes of plastic bolts. I'm not sure why, but I feel it has something to do with our search."

"Start climbing down and I'll pass it to you." Tessa was keen to get off this platform. "I'm not seeing anything else that's going to help us."

The final undertaking was to capture a few images of the old car. If nothing else, Mei would be interested in seeing Ben's car one more time.

Back on the ground, they thanked John and prepared to leave. "It's all yours now." Alex emphasised. "I hope your son can make something of it. We did find some items that could help us, but it's too soon to tell."

"Well, I'm just happy to settle this. Sorry to hear about Ben, but I'd kinda guessed that something bad had happened to 'im. Bloody shame. I liked Ben."

On that note, they left the factory and made their way back to Tessa's apartment. Tessa drove.

"It's damned handy you having your apartment right here in town..."

Tessa interrupted. "Our apartment." She held up a finger exposing her new rings. "Remember, we did that big wedding thing with all those people. Vows and stuff."

"Uh. I stand corrected. Our apartment."

"That's it. We share everything. Well, not everything. She glanced away from the road to give Alex a warning stare. "Touch my toothbrush and you die."

They drove in silence for a bit. So far Alex had been working this investigation without clear objectives. Tessa had simply been going with the flow. Where this would take them wasn't visible from here. "Do you think I'm wasting my time doing all this?"

"Understanding what happened to your father has become important to you. That makes it important to me. Besides, I practically dragged you into the investigation in the first place."

"Yeah, but then we had good reasons for discovery. This time it's different."

"So what? We don't need the law firm for this. It's just you and me bud."

"It's Ben's big cash windfall which worries me. What happens if we find he robbed a bank, or stole some Picasso's and had been selling them on the black market?"

"Then maybe we'll find some extras to decorate the apartment. The prints I have now are a bit dull. When we have dinner guests and they say '*Hey that picture on the wall next to the TV looks like a real Picasso*', we'll get to make smug comments like '*Yeah, looks like...*'"

Tessa took them down a ramp to the basement car park and into her reserved space.

After transferring the recovered papers and GPS to a shopping bag, they made for the elevator. It had been a long day. In the apartment, the items were spread out on the dining room table. The box with the bottle of wine was put to one side. There appeared to be nothing special about it, but at this point it was best left undisturbed.

Tessa poured a couple of large glasses of red from her own rack while they contemplated the remaining items. Most of the contents

extracted from the glove compartment were trash. Receipts from hardware stores, now thirty years old. A tourist map of Ceduna and a furniture store catalogue. The thickest item was the old UBD street directory. It had a soft sky-blue cover and had been folded in half along its length. Alex laid this flat and began flicking through the pages. A cluster of white sheets had been placed between maps containing streets north of the Adelaide city centre. The dominant landmark was the RAAF base at Elizabeth. Its gatehouse had been circled in pen. This seemed like an odd destination to highlight for someone not in the military. Alex pushed the map book to one side and unfolded the two sheets. Both had an RAF logo at the top and had been stamped 'Classified' in purple ink. It had no drawings, just two pages of dot points as a series of specifications. He read some of these out loud.

- *The stair must rise 25 metres*
- *It must achieve full height over six complete turns.*
- *The central core shall be 1500mm diameter*
- *The tread width shall be 2000mm*
- *There shall be no conductive metal elements within the construction.*

"This is a design for a spiral staircase. Six full turns."

Tessa considered the details. "It matches the weird stair plans we found back at the farm. It had six turns. Does it give a project location?"

"No. There are document numbers, the classified stamp and that's it. No dates. Wait. Someone has written a word in pencil under the stamp." He moved the page closer to the light and squinted at the faint letters. "It says 'TOWER'. That's the same project name."

Tessa pulled a notepad from a drawer. "It's time to make some notes." She drew a line vertically down the centre of the page. "This is the method I use at the firm when I'm building a case. On the left we list items that we know to be true. On the right we have unconfirmed speculation and questions. What do we know for sure?"

"Alright, I'll start with some left column facts.

"Ben has detailed plans for a staircase six turns high"

"Check."

"The RAF have a specification for a staircase six turns high. That's a match."

"I agree."

"The design says that there must be no metal in it. We found strange 'metal-free' plastic bolts both in Ben's car and back at the farm.

That's a pretty strong clue that the staircase was built somewhere."

"Yep." Tessa wrote rapidly.

"The RAAF may have been involved. The map to the Aussie air base is where the pages were stored."

"Could his staircase be at this air base?"

"Mmm. Not sure. Air bases are usually low-height affairs except for the control tower. Probably because the RAAF don't like their aircraft bumping into tall things. Wait a moment."

Alex used his portable computer to search some images of the Adelaide air base. There was a picture of a control tower four or five levels high, made from concrete.

"I'd say that is a No. The project must have been somewhere else."

Tessa absently tapped her teeth with the end of the pen in contemplation. "We now have a fairly continuous history of Ben Caslow projects, but not much evidence about this one. Timing appears consistent with it being his final project. I'll put that in the speculation column."

She shifted the pen to the right-hand column. "What questions does this raise?"

"Well, here's a couple for starters. What is a British Air Force project even doing here in Australia?"

"Why the hell would anyone need a twenty five metre high staircase made entirely from wood?"

Tessa scrawled these thoughts down in the right hand column. "The word that keeps popping up is 'TOWER' not '*a* tower' or '*the* tower', just TOWER."

Alex leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He was trying to piece this together as a classic problem where insufficient details were available. "Let's turn this around. If you were in a military establishment and for some reason you needed a twenty five metre high spiral staircase made entirely from wood. That's a very specific design. Few people could do it. Who in Australia would you get with the experience to build a structure like that?"

They looked at each other and said in unison. "Ben Caslow"

Tessa added; "I'm no historian, but since when have the British Air Force been working with the Australian Air Force on major projects?"

"The only one that comes to mind is really old. There were nuclear bomb tests carried out in the fifties at Maralinga. Ben would have been a school kid back then"

"Maralinga?"

"Yes, maybe it was an aboriginal word for big boom, I dunno, but the Brits set off several nukes in the deserts of South Australia so they could join America in the nuclear power club."

"Wouldn't that part of the country have plenty of red dust, like what we saw in the back of the ute?"

"Oh yeah. Lots and lots."

"But that makes no sense. Those tests would have been over thirty years before this staircase project. If anyone had been setting off more nukes in Australia, surely someone would have noticed."

Alex shrugged. "I have no idea. We need more information."

Tessa picked up the cassette tape case and flipped it open. "What about this? It says staircase with bad spelling. We should check it out."

"Do you have something that still plays tapes?"

"Sure. I still have that portable unit we used in Tasmania." She left the room and returned a minute later with the flat tape player and power plug adapter. Alex watched as she inserted the tape, pressed Play and listened to a constant low level hissing noise. The tape was fast forwarded. More noise. A spot check at many intervals throughout the tape produced no meaningful sound. The flip side of the tape was no better. "Well, that was a waste of time. The tape is blank."

Alex added, "Or someone erased the tape. Either way, it's peculiar." He shrugged again and returned the cassette to its case before thrusting it aside. "Ok, What next?"

Tessa slapped a hand on the table. "Let me try and sift through those old fuel dockets. While I'm doing that, maybe you can prise some information out of that old GPS box."

"It's worth a shot. Can I take a look at your home entertainment gear?"

“Sure. What for?”

“I’m going to need some power for this box.” Alex was already on his knees at the back of the Hi-Fi cupboard. He plucked out the power pack for the DVD player. “Close enough. This one is fourteen volts.” He examined the round power plug pulled from the DVD player, then eyed the trailing wires from the GPS. “Now if you can find me a toothpick, some sticky tape, an empty aluminium drink can and a pair of scissors, we should be in business.”

Chapter 6

Ben Caslow went back to the RAAF base. Captain Morris was there, as was Neely the Marshal, or Deputy, or whatever rank these guys had. Military structure was not something he’d thought about much. This time there was someone new at the table who was introduced as a ‘Procurement Officer’, they didn’t bother to give him a name. He was looking at Ben’s quotation. Mumbling to himself and making notes. Ben wasn’t sure what to make of it. The quotation he’d just written up was rough. Worked out in an armchair at a cheap motel not far from the base. He figured the materials for such a wooden monster would be around \$350,000. It would take about a month of planning, another month to gather materials, then about three months to execute the construction. There was more. These military people were already giving him the shits. He didn’t really want the job. The best way out of the situation was to quote a stupid price, then bail after the rejection. On that basis he’d quoted an appalling 2.2 million dollars, with a thirty percent deposit requirement.

The bean counter had stopped mumbling and allowed his reading glasses to drop, so he could look over them. "Okay, that appears to be in order. If you can just sign these documents, and provide bank account details, the first instalment should appear in about ten days."

Ben was aghast. They had accepted his quote? No wonder the country had a deficit problem! Ben numbly endorsed the contract document and slid it back. The nameless bean counter swept it up with other papers, used his index finger to push his glasses further up his nose and scurried out of the room.

Neely took control. "Welcome aboard Ben. You are now a part of Project TOWER. I expect you have plenty of questions." He sat back, steeling himself to deliver exposition with a serious stare and inflection - a tone he probably reserved for these special occasions. "This is an important project. You see, both the Australian government and the British government want to know how their aircraft and infrastructure is going to behave in the event of a nuclear conflict. There's a real concern that the radiant electromagnetic pulse from a nuclear detonation would destroy or disrupt the electronics in our aircraft and they would literally fall out of the sky. The Americans ran a similar program about ten years ago and..." He worked his jaw at this, sounding a little miffed. "...and they decided not to share the results with us. So now we have a joint initiative where the British and Australian governments are running experiments of our own. We have a remote location already chosen."

"Hmm... Joint effort you say." Ben folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in his chair. Universal body language for extreme

scepticism. "Is this going to be like the nuclear tests where the British government irradiated Australian troops to see what would happen? Cos that went badly last time."

"We have been assured that these tests will be intrinsically safe."

"If I had a dollar for every time I heard that expression, I'd have like fifty dollars by now. But alright, I'll go along with it. What's the setup, why do you need a staircase?"

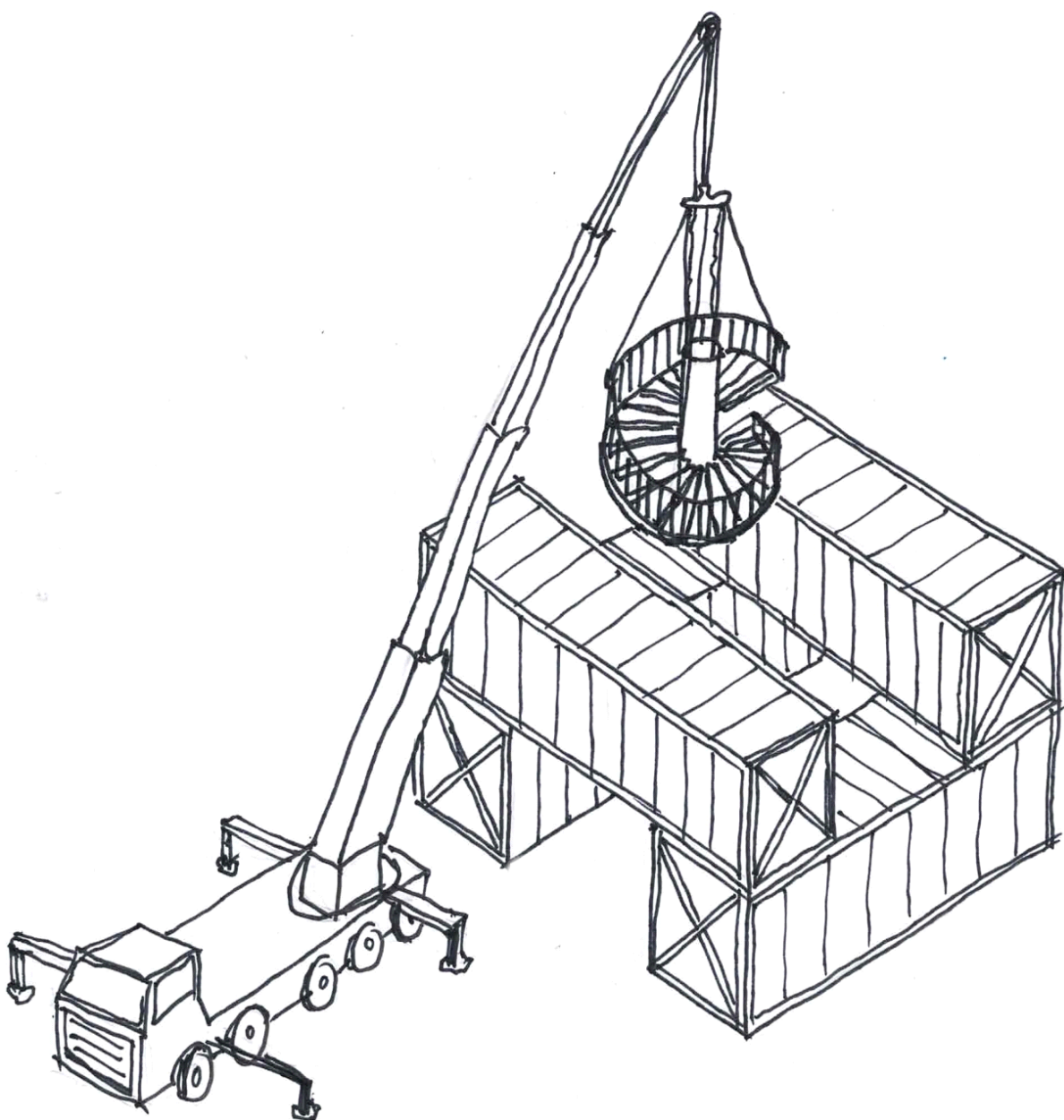
Captain Morris cleared his throat as an interjection and supplied some answers. "We're building a very solid twenty five metre high wooden tower. We need to allow scientific staff to safely go up and down this tower many times in the course of a day. We can't use elevators and cranes and conventional lifts as they all contain metal and would take too long to move in and out of position. On top of the tower we will balance an airframe. An actual aircraft, with operational instrumentation, as though it would be in flight. About thirty metres away a second tower will be constructed. This will be an ordinary steel lattice structure which will support a high power pulse transmitter. When the tests are conducted, high energy pulses will blast the airframe as though it was close to a nuclear detonation."

"You won't be building the tower itself. This will be prefabricated from a series of timber frame boxes, the size of forty foot shipping containers. They'll be stacked to form a large square structure with a hollow core. We need you to build a non-metal staircase that will rise through the centre of that core."

Ben's creative mind clicked into high gear. "Alright. This is critical information. So we don't have to build the staircase 25 metres high – supported by nothing."

The two officers stared at each other. "What do you mean?" Morris asked.

"Look." Ben grabbed a sheet of paper from the document stack, turned it over then picked up a nearby pen. "You arrange one level of these container boxes into a square, say four metres high. I assume you'd have a decent sized mobile crane handy. We'd prepare one section of spiral staircase and lower it into the centre of this square." His hand moved quickly and precisely over the paper, while humming tunelessly. The others silently looked on, not quite knowing what to expect. After three minutes, he slid the sheet across the table. "There ya go. Once a section is lowered into the well, your guys are free to add the next layer of boxes and the next stair section so forth."



The rapid rendering impressed them. "Great. The concept actually sounds good." Morris concurred. "I don't know why our engineers never thought of it."

Ben snorted and deftly transferred the pen to his shirt pocket while they were distracted. "That's because your blokes have no imagination." Again he leaned back in his chair. "This approach is important, because I get to prepare each section at ground level and your blokes do the lifting. I'm not going to be hanging off a ladder trying to build a staircase twenty metres in the air while the boxes are built around it."

To the officers it was evident that they needed Ben's expertise on the site to meet their targets, but his irreverence for the establishment was in plain view.

Ben continued. "Right. What I need now is the drawings you have for these wooden container boxes and some idea of what's on the top of this stack. You're going to need a strong platform and some decent hand rails to make sure that some poor bastard doesn't fall off your radio tower. I don't plan to be that poor bastard."

Neely was emphatic. 'It's not 'a' tower it is *TOWER* T-O-W-E-R, which is an acronym."

"Right, so what does TOWER stand for then?"

Neely counted the words off on his fingers. "*Temporary Overload with Electromagnetic Radiation.*"

Ben shook his head in dismay. "I suppose that someone got a promotion over that."

Neely's face reddened slightly. "No I... I mean the officer concerned didn't..." he cleared his throat. "TOWER is the official project designation and it is only to be used by staff with an appropriate clearance."

"Fine, I believe you." Ben sat forward and looked keenly between the two officers. "There's a big question you've been dancing around so far. I ought to know the answer. Where the hell are you building this monster? Is it here at this base?"

"No. The sort of energy levels we are talking about are much too intense for populated space. It would disrupt radio, TV, aviation comms and probably all the home computers for some distance." Neely shuffled through his collection of papers and pulled out a map. This was unfolded and spread over the table. It showed the entire state of South Australia. "I agree you need to know where the project will operate." He traced his finger along the coastline, west of Port Augusta, west of Ceduna. There was nothing there. Then his finger ventured inland a few hundred kilometres and pointed to a spot that was either a dark brown claypan or a small coffee stain in an otherwise barren landscape. There was nothing else there. Just desert. "We're building it here."

Ben leaned forward hoping to see more detail, but there wasn't any. Lost for better words, he simply uttered. "Fuck me."

Captain Morris waded into the conversation. "You were not far off about nuclear bomb tests. That all happened at Maralinga, a camp about a hundred kilometres due west of our site."

"And you can't go back there cos it still glows in the dark?"

"Something like that, yes."

"But we're talking about a lot of stuff to transport. Materials, sleeping quarters, machinery. A small village. How the hell are you going to get all this kit to that ass-end of the world?"

His finger went to a faint line on the map. "Here's the Trans Continental Railway. It runs through the desert. There's an unmanned siding called 'Bates Siding' We will send in some special trains during the night, between freight services and the Indian Pacific passenger train. Mobile cranes will lift portable buildings and materials off the train, on to waiting trucks. These will go north over sand ridges about twenty kilometres, until they reach a wide claypan. That's where we do our tests."

"So how do the trucks get there?"

The finger moved a little south. "Here's Highway One, which crosses the Nullarbor Plain. There's a roadhouse settlement called Yalata. There are tracks that go north of Yalata which eventually reach the railway line at a place called Ooldea. A service track that follows the railway due east for another 70 kilometres will get trucks and mobile cranes to Bates Siding." He withdrew his finger from the map. "All movements around the railway are being carried out after dark or between normal rail movements so that there is no public awareness of this work."

"So, why the secrecy? Who cares what the military are doing at this shitty place?"

"Back in '51 Prime Minister Menzies made a deal with the British government for us to host the nuclear tests. Menzies was a big monarchist. He didn't even consult his own cabinet before signing off on the nuke tests in Australia. This has always been a sore point. Since then, most collaborations between Australian and British military services have come under a lot of scrutiny. Before this project was started, it was decided that it would be for the greater-good that Australian and British citizens were unaware of these experiments."

"Ah, the '*Greater Good*'. The biggest bullshit reason for every unpopular decision since apes descended from the trees."

Neely frowned. "Are you going to have a problem with this?"

Ben raised both hands from the table in supplication. "Oh, no. No problem from me. I already signed your papers. If I don't build this thing, you'll probably put an assassin on my ass, then pay some hack to do a shit job of it instead. When can I start?"

The officer smiled eerily. "You already have."

Chapter 7

Tessa kept busy at her home desk, loading fuel docket details into a spreadsheet. She was faster at this than Alex would have been. In the meantime Alex had taken over the dining room table with the old GPS unit. He was keen to get some information out of it. While he managed to get some power into it and the CCFL backlight had brought the screen to life, the device had been sulking on an initialisation screen. The unit pre-dated touch screen navigators. Operator controls were a nest of rubbery buttons to the right of the screen. Tessa asked why he was taking so long. Alex replied that the genie had been trapped in the bottle for too long and had a crick in its neck. She called him an idiot and kept typing.

The bottle of red had been drained and relegated to the recyclables bin. Outside, the sun had disappeared behind a cloud bank on the horizon and the lounge was growing dim. The GPS screen finally changed. It switched to a coarse map of Moorabbin. The centre of the display had a graphic that flashed '*Satellite Search*'. This made sense, as the last time this unit operated would have been at the

upholsterer's factory. There was no antenna connected. It wasn't going to pick up any satellites. A short time later it worked this out and the message shifted to *'No Satellites. Assume local mode? Y/N'*.

It was the moment Alex had been waiting for. "Hey Tess, check this out. I'm seeing stuff." Tessa suspended her data entry and leaned over his shoulder. "It's pretty much woken up. There should be waypoints for his favourite locations. That'll be useful, but I'm hoping for trail markers."

Tessa frowned. "I've got a navigator in my car but I've never heard of trail markers."

"Farmers loved these early units because they used coordinates more than maps. They were expensive and built tough. They also had output signals that could be hooked into farm machinery to help spread seed and fertiliser. That's where I first got to play with them." Alex found the zoom button and started zooming out for a wider view. "They have this trick where as long as you're moving, it'll put a dot on the screen every hundred metres. On long trips this'd be set to one dot every kilometre. It will always show the last 200 dots as a line. Great for finding your way back out of a complicated trail. Sometimes if a trail was important, like navigating through a gap in a reef, the operator could save the dot points to memory and restore them later."

He kept on zooming out until the whole outline of Australia appeared. The interior of the country was blank except for state boundary lines. Alex pressed more buttons and navigated through a nest of menus.

The screen showed lines TRACK1 (OFF) TRACK2 (OFF). Using arrow keys he turned Track 1 back to 'ON' and returned to the main screen. There was now a flashing section in far North Queensland. Alex zoomed in on this artefact. A flashing line appeared a short distance out of Toowoomba.

Tessa pointed to it. "That must be the path to the Chinese pagoda where Ben worked. He saved the trail. See if there's something stored in Track 2."

Alex re-entered the trail menu and activated the second memory. Again he zoomed out for a national view. This time a second artefact began flashing in South Australia. He zoomed in until the flashing black line, in the shape of an inverted 'L' filled much of the display.

Tessa was dismayed. "Outback South Australia from nowhere to nowhere. It's all just desert."

"It has to mean something Tess." Alex fetched a notepad and pen. He shifted the screen cursor to each end of the line and wrote down a long string of numbers for each coordinate. Then repeated the process for every major change in direction on the flashing trail. "I'm writing down the UTM coordinates for each point. We can try to transcribe this to better maps to find out what's really at these places."

"What do you mean *U-tem*? I thought that places were all mapped in Latitude and Longitude."

"For aviation and shipping, yes that's true, but as far as Australian Mapping the UTM system is more common. It stands for '*Universal Transverse Mercator*'."

"Oh right. That explains exactly nothing. You may as well have said Underwear Turtle Milkshake."

Alex was patient. "I wouldn't criticize anyone for not knowing this stuff. It's not taught in schools." He picked up a grapefruit from a bowl on the breakfast bar and supported it between three projected fingers. "Okay. The planet is like a ball and you can draw a bunch of lines from the North to the South Pole, that's your Latitude and Longitude system, measured in degrees, minutes and seconds. Problem is that the distances between these vertical lines change depending on how far you are from the equator. This makes latitude and longitude a bitch for land maps. So they use a virtual model."

He thought about this for a moment to produce an analogy that would make more sense.

"Fine then. Imagine the earth as an onion, and it was prepared for cooking by chopping the top and bottom off. So we chop the top and bottom off the round Earth. Now peel away the outer surface of that onion and press it flat on a table. It makes a bit of an odd shape, but now imagine that it has turned into a big, flat rectangle."

"Right. I'm with you so far."

"Good. Next draw sixty lines from top to bottom on the onion skin, so you finish up with 60 vertical strips. Put another line through the centre which represents the equator. Now we have 60 strips in both North and South regions. Here is the fun part. We can measure the height and width of each strip in metres. So every land location in Australia can be expressed as a strip number followed by X and Y coordinates measured exactly in metres. Yes there are distortions in this model, but it works well for land maps, which have grids drawn over them in 1 kilometre squares, or smaller." He pointed to some of the coordinates he just wrote down. "See, the area we are looking at is all in Strip 53. I'll overlay these numbers on a decent digital map and we'll see what this trail is really trying to tell us." Alex lifted his chin in the general direction of the computer desk. "How did you go with the spreadsheet work?"

"Okay. I think I'm done. Come and have a look." They shifted to the computer desk and surveyed the work. "There was a thick wad of fuel receipts clipped together. The locations and dates seemed all over the place, so I created a matrix. On the columns I created a column for every town name where Ben had purchased fuel. He evidently had favourites that he went to many times. What's interesting is that they all follow a path of sorts where the most easterly refuels were in Adelaide and the most eesterly were at the Yalata roadhouse, at the start of the Nullarbor plain. So I sorted the columns in geographic order between those two points."

Alex liked this approach. "Makes sense to me."

"On the vertical axis I added a new row for every fuel purchase and sorted them by date. There were twenty three purchases over a seven month period. To really see the patterns I then coloured in a square against each purchase in a town column. Collectively, by looking at the patterns of coloured squares we can see where he has made separate journeys back and forth between the two extremities."

Alex pointed at the Yalata column. "There seems to be a lot of purchases from that location."

"Yes, that's the telltale. The last stop of a trip will finish with a big purchase at Yalata, then restart some weeks later also at Yalata with another big fuel purchase. Since he never went to any roadhouses further west, we have to assume he did a lot of driving for a while somewhere around Yalata for a few weeks, then doubled back to Adelaide."

"Okay, let's put this together. Bring up an internet search and get me the UTM coordinates for this Yalata place."

Tessa made the entry and brought up basic information about the remote roadhouse, including its coordinates. Alex held up his notes and read out the numbers for the southern-most points of the GPS trail.

Tessa was fast to exclaim. "They match. Within the last digit anyway." She sat back and stared at Alex. "I think we can safely say that Ben was travelling to and from that nowhere spot in the desert at least

five times, probably more, in the last year of his life. It seems to tie in with building a secret metal-free staircase for the RAF or RAAF military. But why? It makes no sense.”

Alex rubbed his chin. “It makes no sense to us here and now because of things that we don’t know. Yet the project is real. Ben was involved, so there had to be pressing reasons for it, even if we don’t understand what they are.” He stretched to relieve cramped muscles. “I’m stuffed. Leave it for now and we can pick it up again tomorrow.”

It had been a very long day.

Chapter 8

When Tessa opened her eyes, she determined two things. Without moving her head, her hand reached out and confirmed she was on her own. Beside the queen-sized bed, a digital clock revealed that it was a few minutes to nine in the morning. This was unusual. She must have been particularly weary. The second realisation was that she really had to pee, badly. Hydraulic pressure trumped the warmth of the bed and forced her to make an erratic line to the bathroom. With that need resolved, she heard sounds of activity in the kitchen. Alex was cooking a breakfast. This was new. Alex *never* cooked breakfast.

“Hey, good morning. You’re up. That saves me the trouble of interrupting your sleep.”

She groaned. "It didn't seem like too much trouble last night. What's the big occasion now?"

"We had another little success this morning. I made some useful internet searches. But not another word until you've eaten." Alex placed a foil-covered plate between the maps and notes of yesterday. The foil was whisked away to reveal two eggs on toast, sharing the plate with strips of bacon. A mug of black tea was placed in the nearest clear space.

She sat numbly before the spread. "Is this going to be a regular thing? Cos I'll get extremely fat and you won't love me anymore."

Alex deftly lowered himself into the adjacent chair with a plate laden with much more of the same. An unhealthy deposit of salt was applied before attacking the meal. Between mouthfuls Alex expanded upon his findings. "We've pretty much worked out that there was a large, non-magnetic tower built by the Australian Air Force somewhere in the desert and that Ben Caslow made a staircase for it. But we didn't know why they did it and what such a thing could be used for. I woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep. I began plugging away at an internet search engine with key words to see if I could shake something loose. I tried strings like 'non-magnetic tower', 'wooden tower' and 'military tower'. This brought forward lots of historic projects dating back to early Tesla experiments, but nothing really matched our profile."

"So was it a complete dead end?"

"No. I plugged in '*electromagnetic wooden tower*' and found an intriguing hit." He paused to pursue an errant fragment of toast around the plate.

"Are you trying to build suspense, or just starving?"

"Mmmm... A little of each. In 1972 Americans started a secret military project called 'ATLAS1'. This stood for 'Air Force Weapons Lab Transmission Line Aircraft Simulator'. A *pretty crappy acronym* was my first thought, but I guess it was the style at the time. They must have thought so too because they also called the project 'Trestle'. Anyway the Yanks built a monster tower entirely from wood so that they could put aircraft hardware on the top and hit it with big electromagnetic pulses. They wanted to know if EMP events from nuclear warfare would disrupt their aircraft. The pulses were intense and produced a lot of electrical interference, so they built this thing in the desert in New Mexico. They made it big enough to hold a B52 bomber. Apparently it is still supposed to be the world's largest all-wooden structure. It made Noah's Ark look like a coffee table by comparison."

Tessa sat up and started to fill in the gaps. "Alright. I'm guessing that if the British wanted to do tests like this for themselves, they couldn't do it in England. Too many people and cities nearby. The obvious solution would be to do it secretly in Australia somewhere. In a desert." She pondered this for a moment. "But aren't Americans and

Brits allies? Wouldn't the Americans just share their results with the English government?"

"No. That's a sore point. Historically, Americans were reluctant to share intel with the Brits because they feared the British intelligence service was full of Russian spies. Which of course was true. Did you ever hear of the '*Spy Catcher*' saga?"

Tessa shook her head and Alex continued. "It was complicated. There was a British MI5 operative who was pretty sure his boss was a Russian spy. The establishment said this was impossible, so the operative quit and wrote a book about how his boss was a Russian spy. Governments don't like being embarrassed. The book was banned in England, but could still be sold in Australia. Brits who wanted to read it were buying in copies from Australia. It was a bestseller and editions eventually found their way to Sunday markets. I read one. The British government tried to have the book banned here too, but an Australian lawyer fought the censorship case and won. Interestingly, the lawyer was Malcolm Turnbull, the same guy who went on to become the Australian Prime Minister." He smiled and waved a hand. "Not important. Anyway, Americans didn't trust British security. This meant that if Brits wanted to know how their gear would survive atomic warfare, they would have to do their own tests on their own tower."

"...Which would mean that they'd need someone like Ben Caslow to build a secret, wooden spiral staircase in the desert. It fits. Sooo... whatever became of the British agent who wrote the spy book? Was he jailed? Fell out of a window?"

Alex laughed. "No. The book made him wealthy. He moved to Tasmania and spent the rest of his life breeding horses."

"Of course. What else could he do? So what's next? How can we check this theory?"

"We've never heard of this project before, which means it's probably still classified. The only sure way is for me to go to this place in the desert and see for myself."

"Won't it be a secure site?"

"Probably, but that was a long time ago. Maybe there's not much security there now."

"Why don't we just call them and ask?"

Alex shook his head. "I've seen this movie. If we do that and get it wrong, black-ops guys in ski masks will plunge through our ceiling, gag us and whisk us away in long bags."

"Okay. Perhaps you've just seen too many movies. I'm going to call them. If it makes you happy, I'll use a public phone."

Alex couldn't fault the logic and raised both hands palm up in resignation. "Alright, but don't do it near here."

Breakfast was completed in relative silence. Tessa made some notes and they descended to the basement car park where her compact was billeted. Alex drove. Once on the road, he peered from side to side. "There aren't a lot of public phones left."

"Go a bit further. There's still a booth out the front of the caravan park on the Bay road."

Once located, Alex overshoot by a few hundred metres, turned down a narrow side street and pulled over. "Off you go then, but wear your jacket with the big hoodie. Security cameras are everywhere."

Tessa approached the booth, hood up, glasses on, feeling slightly silly. Inside, she extracted her note with the switchboard number for the Air Force base in South Australia and dialled.

The response was immediate. "Department of Defence...Whom are you calling?"

"I'd like to talk to someone about an old Air Force project."

"What project would that be?"

"I'm not sure. Something maybe in the outback, twenty years or so ago."

"I'm sorry, I have no idea what you are talking about. Look, I'll transfer you to a Duty Officer. What's your name please?"

"Er.. Joan..." She looked through the window in the booth at a car and caravan pulling out of the campground. "Miss Joan Jayco."

"Fine Miss Jayco. Please hold."

Some thin, indistinct music took control of the line for a full minute.

A man's voice replaced the music. "Hello Miss Jayco. What can we do for you?" The voice was clear, mid-tone and higher than most men's voices. Quite distinctive.

I'm inquiring about a project I had told to me by a friend. Something that was done maybe in the eighties or nineties in the desert

somewhere. It had a big wooden thing that was used for tests of some kind. Maybe the British were involved."

There was a brief hesitation, then: "I'm sorry but I'm sure I've never heard of any such thing. What did you say was the name of your friend?" The voice took on a creepy tone.

Tessa ignored the question and tried again. "I'm sure you would have remembered something like this if it was a real thing. A giant wooden structure? Maybe with an aircraft parked on top of it?" She decided to go for it. "It was like a really big tower used for radio experiments or something."

"No. I'm sure there's never been a project called *TOWER*." It was a slip that could easily have gone unnoticed.

"I didn't say *TOWER*, I said 'A tower'."

Another hesitation. "Where are you calling from Miss Jayco?"

"Ah, from my apartment in Circular Quay, Sydney"

"That's odd Miss Jayco. Perhaps you made a simple mistake. Aren't you calling from Bay Road in Melbourne... Out the front of a caravan

park? Miss...Jayco. Is that your real name?"

Tessa hung up, tightened her hood and walked rapidly down the street. At the car she quickly dropped in the passenger seat and simply said "Drive!"

"Come on. How did it go?"

"It's real. There was a creepy guy who didn't give much away, but he knew what I was talking about. When I asked about tower structures, he said there was no such thing as 'Tower'. Singular.

"That sounds like a confirmation to me." He glanced at her again. You look worried. What else did he say?"

"He knew I was calling from a public phone at the caravan park."

"Ahh. He had a CLI display. That's *Call Line Identification* and a reverse number database. He probably knew where you were before he took your call."

"Here I was thinking *you* were the paranoid one."

"Paranoia isn't paranoia if it's true." Alex drove in a wide arc and made his way back to the apartment. "That settles it then. I'm going to try and find this thing for myself."

"Alright. I'm in too. This is one trip you're not doing on your own."

Chapter 9

Once the decision had been made to follow the Ben Caslow trail, several preparations were in order. The first task was to bring back Alex's car back from Tasmania. The large 4WD would certainly be needed. A booking was made for the first available slot on the Bass Strait ferry service. This was to be in six days' time. It required Alex to take a flight to Hobart, collect the car and travel to Devonport before the ship sailed. That was fine. The plan still gave him a few days to complete other important tasks.

Alex quietly contemplated the necessary requirements of their outback journey. Probably there were more remote places on this planet, but this desert region would be somewhere close to the top of the list. They needed sufficient food, tools and critical spares for independent travel in tough conditions. The big 4WD had good range, but it was thirsty. At least five additional jerry cans were needed for backup fuel. As soon as they left the main Nullarbor highway, there'd be no more fuel stops. As the destination was probably on prohibited land, it was going to be important to be as inconspicuous as possible. Roadhouses left a decisive trail. These were spaced roughly every 200km. If someone wanted to trace his movements, they need only review the plate recognition cameras at these sites. He resolved to carry plenty of cash for the fuel purchases he had to make, instead of using his cards. Another thought occurred. It would be better to ensure that their mobile phones were shut down prior to departure. Few devices leave signature trails as broad as the pings from nearby cell phone towers. Perhaps these measures were pointless, but it was better to be careful and waste a little time, rather than suffer regret at not having taken basic precautions. Tessa's phone call had made him nervous.

Alex had driven past military sites before. There'd be signs posted on gates declaring them closed and that it would be a 'federal offence' to access an area. Given the remoteness of the location, and the years that had passed since Ben had worked on the project, it was probable that the site was now abandoned. There may be nothing out there at all. More likely, the Department of Defence would just put a chain across the access track and leave the site in a dormant state in case they ever wanted to conduct another experiment. He added a cordless angle grinder and spare 'aged' padlocks to the list. It was a small task to cut a chain and add an extra padlock rather than leave a gate in an obvious unsecured state.

Alex also knew from experience that just because a location was remote, didn't mean that people weren't watching. It was areas of the greatest isolation where any movements would attract attention. A white 4WD car going up a remote track would be noticed. Extra precautions were in order.

On sandy tracks, tyre marks were like fingerprints. Fresh imprints could reveal the passage of someone on a minor track where nobody ought to have business. The effect was real. If the wind was light, tread marks will remain for many days. Tyre imprints can tell a careful observer the direction of travel and reveal when a vehicle has followed a track and did not return the same way. A cue that the traveller may still be in the vicinity. Alex had spent enough time around farming communities to know that such observations were real. Sometimes tyre tracks heading in a direction where none ought to be were reason enough to be reported to the police.

Alex drove back to the upholsterer in Moorabbin. He found him seated at an ancient sewing machine. A classic device, probably older than its owner, but still tough enough to stitch modern seat leather and padding. When the current pass was complete he paused to peer at the visitor, then nodded in recognition.

"John, can you put together some wheel covers for me?"

He scratched his head. "Wheel covers, like for a steering wheel?"

"No. I want loops of fabric covers to wrap around my four tyres, so that I can travel a little way on a track without leaving an imprint."

He blinked passively. "Mmmm... Kurdaitcha shoes for your car. Sounds to me like you're up to no-good. What's the deal?"

"I'm trying to find out what happened to Ben Caslow."

"Well okay then. That's a mighty fine cause. Give me your tyre sizes and I'll put together a set of 'boots' for you."

"Much appreciated. Let me know what I owe you."

He dismissively waved a hand. "I'm not going to charge, but when you get back, come and tell me what you found."

Alex nodded. "Done. Do you have everything you need?"

He pointed to a haphazard stack of wool and fabric. It had reached a certain height, then fallen against an outside wall. "When seats come in for rework, usually they're still covered in old car seat covers. The owners don't want them back. I just put them in a pile. I'll make up a set of tyre covers out of old sheepskin. You'll put them on like snow chains and hold them in place with elastic straps. They won't last for

long distances or hard surfaces, but you probably won't have to travel far."

"What was that you called them? Cad-something?"

"No. I said Kurdaitcha shoes. It's an aboriginal word. Witch doctors would weave special footwear made of emu feathers. They could walk through the camp of an enemy without leaving a trail."

"Perfect. You're a legend. I don't know if I'll need them, but..."

John finished the sentence for him. "... but it's better to have them and not need them than need them and not have them. Yep, I know how this works."

He committed to have them ready the following week. They shook hands. Alex wove his way through the piles of fabric and car seats back to the street.

One more precaution was in order. A privately owned plain white car in the outback would always be noticed. A car with fluorescent stripes and large numbers on the side was inevitably part of a vehicle fleet for mining or railway maintenance. Wherever such vehicles were seen, they were there because they were supposed to be there and were mostly ignored. Alex went to a shop that specialised in industrial safety gear. He purchased some long strips of fluorescent yellow reflective material. It was magnetised and would stick to metal. They also carried magnetised numbers. Black digits on a white

background. They had a choice between digits 100 mm high and a much larger series. He took several of each type. They also stocked high-visibility worker vests in fluorescent orange. Alex added two of those to the pile.

The next stop was a bit more speculative. He visited an electronic component shop and purchased a lot of small parts. This included an indicator light, a beeper and many metres of hookup wire. Alex had the germ of an idea, but didn't know how well it would work.

Back at the apartment, he laid out all the protective dinner mats he could find and covered much of the dining room table. The components were dumped in a pile. He plugged in a soldering iron and got to work.

Tessa was out running some errands of her own. The apartment had been empty for the weeks of their holiday and perishable supplies were absent. When she returned, Alex was still deeply focused upon his assembly. It was slowly taking shape into something, but just what that was remained obscure. She watched for a few moments, then left him to it, put the groceries away and prepared coffee.

Some minutes later, Tessa slid a mug next to his elbow and cradled a cup of her own between her hands. "Hell, I give in. What the hell are you making here?"

"Alex sat back and pointed to his new contrivance. "I've probably finished, but it needs testing and adjustment."

"Go on..."

"It is a detector for low frequency radio waves. Even lower than the AM radio stations." He returned the soldering iron to its holder. "One thing worries me about going up these bush tracks. If it goes to an old military site, probably there will be a locked gate, or some strands of fencing wire. These are remote sites and nobody will be around. Anyone can drive around a locked gate and security forces know it. If they want to know when strangers are moving about on their closed tracks, they'd want some kind of automatic warning. So I got to thinking. What sort of detection system would they have? Distances are vast, so they'll be detecting cars and not people."

"Could they put up some kind of electric eye beam, like when you enter a shop?"

He shook his head. "No. They would false-trigger every time a wallaby or emu wanders up a track. Security cameras with movement detection have the same problems. I'm pretty sure they'll be looking for metal. Have you ever noticed the fine lines cut in the road near traffic lights?"

"Sure, they use them in turning lanes. They detect cars and trigger the turn arrows. If you don't stop on them, the lights won't change. I don't understand how it works. Modern magic I suppose."

"Yes, modern magic that nobody thinks about. What really happens is that several loops of wire are buried into the roads which in turn connect to a low power tuned circuit. The wire loop affects the resonant frequency of a signal. When a car goes over the loop, the metal alters the tuning and the change trips things like traffic light turn arrows."

"Hmm... Clever. I'd always wondered how they did that."

"For remote track security, there is a fair chance they'd set some of these detectors in the dirt under the tracks. A small solar panel and battery would power it. Whenever someone goes up a track, it would trip a low power satellite transmitter, a bit like the emergency beacons used by boat owners and mountain climbers, except the military have their own networks. The technology is pretty reliable. Once set up, it can be left alone for years." He paused and tapped the new contrivance with the end of a pen.

These were new concepts for Tessa. "How come you know about this?"

"I'd read articles about security on a few of the bigger farming properties and cattle stations. They are using this method to signal when people are moving around their land, maybe to steal livestock. They can send alerts to mobile phone networks or direct wireless links back to the farmhouse."

"So what can we do about it?"

“Quite a lot really.” He slid the contrivance across the table so that she may take a closer look. “This gadget is a kind of radio receiver. It listens in the frequency range of their wire loops. If we put a nice coil of wire on the front of the car as an antenna, we should get a beep if we ever get anywhere near one of these road coils. We should detect them a long way before the road coil detects us.” He tilted his head in thought for a moment. “In the basement of our apartment block, there’s a loop in front of the boom gate that lets us out of the car park. We can start by testing it there.”

“That’s all a bit smart. How is it that you know how to make these things?”

Alex shrugged. “Ben Caslow was a master carpenter. I’m not.” He pointed again to the device on the table. “I know about this stuff instead.”

“Well, it looks like I married a clever dick then.”

“Yes you did, but remember that’s an entirely different skill set. You’ll have to wait until later. Right now I need to test this circuit.”

Chapter 10

At the air base, it took about four seconds for Ben to decide that he didn't like one of his so-called bosses. The man had introduced himself as Flight Sergeant Tim Lipton. Sporting a trim moustache and portly waistline to the point of obesity, the man swaggered into the room and ignored Ben's outstretched hand. He looked at Ben with a curt, surly examination, one might normally reserve for a chocolate bar found floating in a swimming pool. Ben immediately concluded that this bloke was a tosser who believed he was the most important person here.

After announcing his name the man went on. "You'll be working for me. I'm going to make sure you do your job – and nothing else. As far as you are concerned, I'm the most important person here."

'Nailed it' Ben thought. He spoke to the Flight Sergeant in a soft, measured voice. "With all due respect, I don't think that's correct."

The man's eyes widened. Ben looked to the left and right, then conspiratorially gestured with one finger for the man to lean in closer. "I'm a bit curious... If you're *really* the most important person on this project, then why aren't *you* the one building this fucking staircase?"

A range of emotions fled across the sergeant's face, like a chameleon trying and failing to choose the right colour. The man gave up, spun on a heel and marched off. It was at that moment that Ben decided how he was going to keep himself entertained for the duration of this mission. Obviously Flight Sergeant Lipton had had his own way for far

too long. Henceforth, Ben's secondary task, no, his *duty*, was to devise fresh ways of annoying this man at every opportunity.

The first month passed rapidly. Ben had been preparing materials at a secure staging area with its own rail siding close to Port Adelaide. There was a nest of long, empty and probably historic warehouse buildings, ringed by rusty Department of Defence fencing, complete with the usual warnings against trespass. Conditions were primitive, but it provided plenty of space to work unobserved by passing traffic. They took over what would once have been a customs administration building. Here they hammered out the design details and ordered the necessary materials. As parts arrived, they were catalogued and sorted in the order of assembly for the project site.

Ben made it plain that he'd be driving to the site in his own car. They didn't like it, but his pretext was that his precious tools had to be transported by him alone. Once on site, his car would be useful. Mostly it was about independence. Ben didn't like being reliant on others for getting around. This was how he had always worked and this requirement was not negotiable.

Barely a week after his arrival at the siding, everything changed. Angela arrived. He'd been in the yard with a notepad carefully mapping material placement. If this wasn't done right, there would be parts everywhere at the project site and he'd struggle to find them. Such thoughts were interrupted by a familiar voice from behind.

"Mister Caslow. A word if I may."

Ben turned to see Angela in immaculate RAAF uniform, complete with a navy-blue handbag slung over one shoulder. Ben smiled and lowered his notepad. "Several words are in order. For what do I owe this pleasure?"

She stepped forward, not speaking straight away, her face failed to conceal a crooked smile. With one hand she dusted down Ben's shoulder, flicking away an invisible clump of lint, then seized both lapels of his collar, tugging them simultaneously in a vain attempt to restore symmetry.

"This is a classified project. I have clearance and you have clearance. Our superiors want as few people as possible to have the full picture. I've been assigned to be your liaison officer to ensure you get what you need. In their words, *'Make sure that you don't fuck anything up.'*"

"The dictionary should have a word for not fucking things up and they could include a picture of me next to it."

"Very droll. Okay, what's happening? Are we on track here?"

"Yes we are. Some of the timber has already arrived. Most hasn't. I have die samples of our special plastic bolts. They look good. I've ordered thousands."

“And of course this supplier doesn’t know what these are for.”

“They’re not really interested, but they think I’m experimenting with some kind of jetty construction using seawater-proof bolts.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “I’d love to tell you more, but it’s almost lunch time and I’m looking for someone with a discretionary spending budget to buy me a lunch. You wouldn’t happen to know anyone like that would you?”

Angela’s nose twitched sharply, and again she struggled to conceal a smile. “I have more discretion than you will ever know. Let’s go.”

There was a café walking distance from the siding, on the edge of a more modern commercial precinct. It had tables and some booths for contractors who needed to discuss their work. They spread out notes and worked out what needed to be done. Angela was impressed, Ben was organised and had his part of the project under control. Ben enjoyed her presence. She was exceptionally smart. This lunchtime rendezvous became part of their daily routine. Ben conveyed that some of the forklift drivers at the siding didn’t like taking commands from a civilian. Angela subsequently organised a site meeting and made it clear that anyone not following Ben’s instructions was at risk of being written up. Her message was unambiguous. They obeyed.

A few days later Angela accompanied Ben on a visit to the Adelaide plastics factory that was producing the special bolts. For this journey she wore civilian clothes. The production manager took them to a

long machine with digital readouts and hydraulic rams that could be seen through inspection windows. There were other machines working unattended and the noise was high. He talked loudly to compensate. "We're using a composite of plastics and glass fibres. It's a tough product, but it means we have to work with higher than usual temperatures." He pointed to a funnelled hopper on the top of the machine attended by a step ladder. "The beads go in there and they cook to about 420°. Then the plastic melt gets forced into the die at high pressure." On cue there was chuff of compressed air escaping, the hydraulic ram withdrew and a long plastic bolt dropped into a holding drum. The die closed again, ready for the next shot. "The shrinkage with this product is huge. We have to cast the bolts twenty two percent oversize and they shrink back to spec when they cool."

Ben pointed at the coarse edges of the threaded bolts in the collection tray. "Are the nuts going to screw on these rough threads without sticking?"

He nodded. "They will when we're done. We put the bolts through another process on the automatic mill. A die pass cleans up any artefacts on the threads."

"What about the nuts and washers?"

"Already done. We made those first. The bolts and washers get cast in a single shot, but the nuts have an inside thread. Once cast, they have to be screwed off the die with a compressed air gun as an extra step."

They stepped from the noisy factory into a much quieter office. Angela asked the pressing question. "When will the order be filled?"

"You ordered the bolts in three different lengths. The first two are done. We're doing the last type now. Unless there are problems, the last of it should be delivered next Tuesday."

She nodded. This was on schedule.

They left the plant satisfied that all was under control.

At the siding, materials were in numbered stacks ready for loading into rail trucks. First were the portable buildings, plastic wrapped in sections. These would be sent a month before the rest. One end of the yard was Ben's responsibility. Stacks of heavy timbers were being prepared in an order that would permit sequential unloading at the project site. Next lay mounds of galvanised steel which would form the secondary metal tower. It looked complicated and Ben was glad that he has nothing to do with that part of the project.

Ben and Angela had been working well together and the time they spent on and of the site grew a little longer each day. To the crew it was all strictly business. After hours, their association drew much closer. There was quiet acknowledgement that close contact would cease when it was time for Ben to move to the project site.

But not yet.

In Ben's hotel room, Angela perched naked in the large double bed, with her back to the headboard. The doona pulled close around for warmth. Her uniform carefully folded and laid out on a chair next to the bed. Ben stood near the open door of the small bathroom, towelling down after a hot shower.

Abstractly, she reviewed her circumstances. "If you were an enlisted asset, my being here would be breaching all sorts of conduct rules."

Ben worked his towel efficiently then dropped it to the floor next to the bathroom door. "Then it's a good thing that I'm not part of the system."

Angela mused at his form. Ben was not a tall person. Fully clothed, he looked a little chubby. This was not the case. The muscles on his arms were knotted and powerful. Likewise, his thighs were pillars of twisted muscle, but unlike a body builder who sought an idealised form; this was functional musculature of a middle-aged man who was no stranger to hard work.

"Your file was a thick one and I read most of it. Among other things, it said that you'd left something of a trail of broken relationships behind you. A woman with any sense should stay a healthy distance

away at all times. And yet, forewarned with this portfolio of facts, here I am. How did that happen?"

Unselfconsciously, he walked to the bed, and perched gently on its edge. "I'm not asking you to do anything you don't want to do." He peered into her eyes and gently smiled. "That dossier is incomplete. Ignore it and write your own. That's the only proof that counts."

Chapter 11

Two weeks later Ben drove his old ute to the outback construction site. As he was preparing to depart, Angela approached to bid farewell with a handshake and a delicate hand squeeze, lest others were watching, then produced a large yellow envelope. Ben rifled through this and exposed an orange card B2R4 written on it. This, Angela explained, would be his room at the construction site. Building 2, Room 4. The envelope also contained a rule book on contractor conduct. Ben read the first paragraph to see what it was about, then thrust the document through the open window and onto the floor of his car. It may come in handy one day to start a campfire. ,

"One more thing" Angela withdrew a folded paper bag from her pocket. It was taped shut, but it revealed the outline of a small rectangular object. "Don't open this one until you've cleared all the towns and you're on the open road." With that, Ben gave a mock salute and departed the compound.

His time with Angela was... memorable and their time together gave him something to contemplate on the long journey. Adelaide had been warm, but the temperature soared to the high thirties as he headed west. All the distant views were distorted by a heat haze and the edges of the bitumen took on a soft, wet look. His car lacked air conditioning, and sweat dampened his tank-top and shorts, but he remained comfortable. After Tasmania, Ben was enjoying a little heat. After several hours, the last of the towns were left behind and his thoughts wandered to the paper bag. Now would be a good time. With one hand firmly grasping the steering wheel, he was able to lean over and pry open the mysterious paper bag. Inside was a plastic cassette tape. In Angela's handwriting it said 'Spiral Starecase'.

Not quite comprehending its significance, Ben thrust it into the seldom used tape player in the dashboard. Trumpets sounded and vocals cut in *I... don't remember what day it was...* Ben laughed and joined in on the chorus. He knew this one. "...*If all my dreams come true I'll be spending time with you! Oh I love you more today than yesterday! But not as much as to-morrow!*" It came back to him. A classic song of the sixties, sung by a band that called themselves Spiral Starecase. He rewound it and played it three times, then stopped because the earworm had cut in and the track began to loop in his head.

The day wore on. The first leg was a thousand kilometres of sealed road. When he eventually left the bitumen, Ben pulled over and halved his tyre pressures. This measure took a lot of the shock out of the ride. Conditions still took a heavy toll upon his aging vehicle and rattles developed where there had been none before. With the main road left behind, there was still two hundred kilometres of bush tracks ahead of him. Fine sand the colour of tomato soup accumulated in every nook it could find in both the car and its driver. It was with some relief that he reached the compound late on

another cloudless afternoon. A uniformed man met Ben at the gate, identified him and waved him into the compound.

The work camp was not a large one. It had been assembled in a few short weeks. A group of five relocatable buildings were placed end-to-end for accommodations. In front of these were three larger buildings that had been transported in sections and pressed together. One was a mess hall, which doubled as a project briefing room. Another was a tech room devoid of windows, where the science team did their 'secret stuff'. The third was an administration building for the officers. This building was distinct because of a two metre satellite dish that had been bonded to its roof with thick struts. Beyond the three buildings lay a row of six full-length shipping containers. They had been spaced several metres apart on a long concrete slab. Shade sails stretched between each container to create a series of work bays. Ben had been allocated one of these bays for his staircase work. Unseen, behind a mound of thoughtfully placed soil, a generator gently throbbed away, delivering power to the entire camp.

Ben knew the site plan well and nosed the car into his workspace. He located a ladder and placed it against one of the containers that formed a wall. Climbing to the top, he walked the length of the steel roof and cast his eyes around the site in a slow circle. It felt good to be stretching his legs after the long drive.

The soil was extremely poor. There were extended patches of raw, red sand showing between bushes and stunted trees. Very few of these trees had grown higher than four metres. He could see over the top of a virtual ocean of scrub to near infinity in three directions. Anyone walking into that scrub could become 'bushed' and fail to find their way back to camp. The sky was still a hemisphere of deep blue.

To the north, the scrub petered out into a natural claypan, almost a kilometre across. This was to be the site of the wooden tower and his staircase.

Ben's contemplation of his new world was interrupted by a voice from below.

"Mister Caslow... Mister Caslow, I was asked to give you this." It was an airman, a lowly errand runner, standing at the base of the ladder, looking up.

Ben sat on the edge of the container, dangling his feet and legs over the side. "G'day. What have we here?"

"Orders from Flight Sergeant Lipton. All civilian contractors must wear navy-blue work shirts at all times, so that they may be identifiable from the enlisted men." He held up a short stack of folded shirts.

"I see, and how many civilian contractors are there at this site?"

"Just you sir." Was the sheepish reply.

"What's your name young fella?"

"Aaron Sir."

"Well Aaron, just pop those shirts on the ground next to the ladder. There's a good lad. Now, from now on, I'm not Sir, I'm just Ben. Got it?"

"Yes Sir. I mean, Yes Ben." He grinned, placed the shirts near the ladder and scurried away.

Building 2 had a door at each end and a narrow corridor serving each of four tiny rooms. A fifth room contained a compact shower stall and toilet. Room 4 was easy to find. Each room had a tiny metal frame that could hold a square of card for identifying the occupant. Probably it was intended for a printed business or identity card of some kind. Ben had no such missive, but he always carried a black felt-tipped marker. In the centre of the frame, he simply wrote BEN and re-capped the pen. Now it was home.

Its interior consisted of a basic single bed, with blankets stacked on one end. A small wooden drawer set under the window, a clothes cupboard, two chairs and a tiny table pressed against one wall. The window set in a sliding aluminium frame that could be opened, but a fine insect screen was embedded behind it. The view was of a cyclone fence and bland mulga scrub a short distance beyond the glass. Next to the window a small air conditioner was recessed into the wall. This room would be his home for several months. Ben

dumped a large sports bag on the bed and unpacked its contents into the available drawer space. An item of prominence was a red notebook. It was blank and one of many that he'd purchased in Hobart some time ago. Ben was not normally a diary writer, but this was not a normal job. Back in Adelaide they'd been adamant that since this was a classified project, he was not to keep any personal notes about his work. The moment they told him it was forbidden was the moment he decided that it had to be done. His irreverence for the establishment ran deep. Still, it wouldn't do to leave such a thing lying around. He'd need a safe spot. He spoke to himself out loud. "Okay Ben, if you were a sneaky carpenter – and you are - where would you hide a diary?" His eyes fell upon the chest of drawers and some ideas began to present themselves.

There was a knock on the frame of the open door behind him. A uniformed man filled the space. He was thin with prominent teeth, narrow moustache and a receding hairline. Like a Meerkat in human form. The man smiled and presented a row of teeth resembling inverted pickets.

"They said someone new was coming in today. I'm Nolan." He gestured down the narrow hallway with his thumb and a closed fist. "I'm in Room 3" He took an awkward step forward and held out a hand.

Ben shook it. "Ben here. So... is there anything that I should know about?"

"Yes." He grinned. "The first two people to have a shower each day gets a warm one. After that, not so much."

"Well, that's good to know. I'm still feeling my way around this place."

"You don't look military. What brings you to this god-awful part of the world?"

"Carpentry. Apparently I'm building a big staircase thing up the middle of the bloody big tower thing."

"Oh, the non-metallic one right? I'll be on the steel tower next to it, working on the gadget that's going to be blasting your tower from my tower. At least that's the plan."

"Plans are good. Just as long as I'm somewhere else when you do the blasting." He pointed at his bag. "I'm still unpacking. We can chat later. Just now I'm a bit shagged."

Nolan nodded by bobbing his entire body and rapidly retreated down the hall with the gait of a frightened ostrich. A flighty fellow, but still, he seemed mostly harmless.

A glance at his wristwatch confirmed the time of day and he decided he was slightly more hungry than tired. The mess hall beckoned. Ben left the accommodation block and followed a freshly defined path between the buildings. The mess hall was a clever fabrication of

three transportable sections joined together. The interior was large, with several rows of tables and chairs. At the distant end a kitchen could be seen through a wide serving hatch. Within the kitchen a man in his early thirties clattered about in haste. Ben approached the hatch and made himself obvious.

"G'day, I'm Ben."

"G'day Ben, I'm busy."

"Hi Busy. Your mother must have really thought that one through. Do you have a sister called Bea?"

The man laughed, suspended his work and came to the hatch. "They said I'd have an extra mouth to feed from today. You must be it." He wiped his hands down his apron and held one out. "Tony. Tony Chooquas. You'd better call me Chook. Everyone else does."

Ben reciprocated. "Nice to meet you Chook. Apparently I'm supposed to be building a bloody great staircase up the middle of some bloody great tower. More importantly, how would I go about finding something to chew on? Maybe the makings of a sandwich?"

Chook pulled the stainless steel handle on a commercial refrigerator and extracted a plate of sandwiches with protective cling wrap. He deposited the plate in front of Ben. "Get stuck into those."

They looked good and his hunger was real. Ben broke the film and went to work on the ham, cheese and tomato combo. He spoke between mouthfuls. "Thanks friend. I needed this. Still, you had these ready to go. I feel a little guilty if I've deprived someone of their well-earned lunch."

He waved away the concerns, "Don't worry about it. I'll make some more. Besides, the guy who ordered em could afford to lose weight."

"Ah." He mumbled. "These wouldn't be for a certain portly Staff Sergeant?"

Chook nodded. "The very same."

"So now I feel a little less guilty. However, I don't want you to get into any trouble."

"S'ok. I'm the one bloke in the camp he has to be nice too. He knows it and I know it. He looked to the oven. "Sorry, I've gotta keep goin, there'll be a bunch of hungry men here in about fifteen minutes." He stepped away from the hatch and continued his work.

Ben nodded, collected the remaining sandwiches in a paper napkin and left the hall. He wanted to check out the construction site while

the crew was at lunch and the site would be quiet. Too far for a comfortable walk, he made his way back to the car and drove there directly. This was why he didn't simply want to reach the site by train, plane or whatever. Ben liked to keep his car close for the flexibility and independence it provided.

A fresh track had been cut through the scrub to the edge of the claypan. The path onto the claypan itself had been slightly elevated with local stone. An expensive looking four wheel drive car with several passengers travelled towards him. A long cloud of dust rose behind it. As it passed, the driver politely raised an index finger in acknowledgement. Ben waved back. The crew was probably on its way to the mess hall.

The sheer scale of the project began to present itself. A large rectangle, perhaps a hundred and fifty metres long had been scraped clean. To one end four immense concrete pads had been laid forming a square, with a fifth pad in the centre. This Ben guessed this would be the base for each corner of the wooden tower and his central staircase. The pads were joined by narrow concrete walkways. At the far end of the rectangle, the first stage of a steel tower had been installed. It encompassed a prefabricated steel staircase. At the base of this a single relocatable building had been mounted. This was probably the structure intended to house Nolan's EMP generator. There was plenty of machinery at hand. A grader, bulldozer and a modern mobile crane were parked neatly in a row. Alex doffed a cloth cap as he slid from the seat. The sun was almost at its zenith. Despite the intense heat, he walked a full lap of the site, trying to get a feel for the job at hand. Certainly a lot of money had been invested in this project and his contribution was just one of many that had to come together at the right moment. Still, the job felt eerie for reasons that were hard to define. The military use, the secrecy and the remote location certainly contributed to that sensation. Not for the first time, Ben felt a nagging feeling that despite the generous

recompense, it would have been wise to walk away from the entire deal. After a final sweep, he returned to the car and slowly drove back to the camp.

Later that afternoon Sergeant Lipton was taking long strides between buildings when he heard music. He paused mid-step and tilted his head towards the source. It came from the shaded space between two containers. The space allocated to the upstart contractor. Ben was there with his rustic ute, windows down and music drifting out. The only station in range was an AM broadcast out of Streaky Bay. The Beach Boys were singing about Californian girls. Next to the car Ben worked a large bucket of water, giving his car a well-earned wash. His hopelessly oversized canary-yellow Hawaiian shirt was open at the front, exposing a chest of matted hair. Shirt tails hung loosely just above his knees.

"Hey Sarge, how's it hangin?" Ben diligently worked a door with a wet cloth.

The Sergeant stood, hands on hips observing this action.

"Mister Caslow, There are restrictions on water usage here. You are forbidden from using our water for washing your car."

"Absolutely Sarge. I couldn't agree more. That's why I brought my own water." Ben pointed at an opaque water drum lashed in the rear of his ute.

The officer started to say something. Stopped and then started over. "Why are you not working?"

Ben dunked the rag in the bucket and continued to scrub before replying. "You see, it's like this. I make staircases out of wood. No wood, no staircase. I'm told wood will arrive tonight, or maybe tomorrow night."

The Sergeant changed tack. "I was informed that you had been instructed on your correct dress code and supplied appropriately. Why are you wearing....That?"

"Oh, you're talking about them blue shirts. Thanks for sending em over, but they made my neck itch. Still, they didn't go to waste."

Lipton followed Ben's arm to the torn blue wash cloth he was holding and a similar blue rag floating in the bucket. He scowled an expression of disgust that would have startled a Rottweiler, and marched onwards.

Ben smiled, briefly savoured the moment and happily continued his toil.

Chapter 12

As road trips went, they were making good time. Despite its underlying purpose, the journey had taken on the air of a holiday. In Tessa's case this was still the literal truth. She had a week of leave remaining before her inevitable return to the office. The crossing into South Australia occurred without slowing down. A procession of pine plantations lined both sides of the road for some distance before the land transitioned into immense vineyards. At intervals, the long rows of vines were interrupted with what appeared to be small wind turbines that weren't turning. Alex pointed at one and noted that they were fans strategically placed for frost-protection. These too fell behind and were replaced by open farmland. The big Ford reeled in the kilometres. Alex had driven it back from Tasmania via the overnight ferry service. Next to his regular tools, he'd added spare fuel, groceries, sleeping bags and a small dome tent, all packed tight. Little space remained under the rear cover.

They swapped seats on the hour. Presently Tessa was behind the wheel and drove the large car aggressively. Occasionally dropping into potholes and venting with zeal. "Fucking shit road. It's supposed to be a main highway and it sucks. My little car would have busted a rim by now." Without changing speed, Tessa jerked the wheel to the left, placing two wheels in the emergency stopping lane, straddling a fresh string of divots.

Alex wasn't listening. Again and again he'd been trying to second-guess what they might learn from this trip and what may have been forgotten. "What are we missing Tess? What else should we have done before we left?"

Tessa drove another half-kilometre before answering. On such a long trip it was best to contemplate before speaking. She held the wheel tightly between both hands. Evasive action may be necessary with little warning. "Our notes tell us that Ben Caslow worked this final contract, somehow received a large windfall of money, then fell ill and died."

"Maybe we should have hassled the RAAF a little harder to see what Ben had been up to."

Tessa shook her head. A firm no. "It's a two-way process Alex. We'll chase the establishment harder, but not yet. It was a classified project. We haven't found anything about it from the normal channels. Probably it's still classified. If we press the Air Force too hard too soon, they'll still tell us nothing and become even more suspicious. To prise details from them, we'll need more leverage. So far we only have a cold trail."

"True. If we can build a better picture of what Ben had been doing, then maybe we can push a little harder." He scratched his head absently. "I just hope that I'm not wasting our time out here."

Tessa turned and grinned. "We're on a road trip. We're together. Enjoying the scenery. Let's just go with it. Besides, I haven't spent time in the desert before. There seems to be rather a lot of it."

"That's an understatement. Most Aussies have no idea how big their own country is. They've only seen bits from movies like Mad Max and

Croc Dundee."

"How much of it have you seen then?"

"Not as much as I'd like. Have you ever heard of a bloke called Lennie Beadell?"

"No. Should I have?"

"Probably. He was the last of our real explorers. Back in the 1950's the Brits decided to set off some nukes, way out in our desert. There were no roads. The military put this team together with a surveyor, a bulldozer driver, grader driver and a cook. They drew a rough circle around the centre of the country and got them to put in a bunch of tracks. Len Beadell was the leader and surveyor. A rough sort of fellow. Drove one of the original British LandRovers."

Tessa briefly looked at him, then returned her gaze to the road, but said nothing.

"Over the next ten years the team made about seven thousand kilometres of track. Lots of tracks. He'd drive into unmapped desert, and flash a mirror to the dozer driver, who'd aim straight for him. The crew even made first white contact with some aboriginal tribes."

"It's all news to me. How do you know about it? Nerd school?"

Alex responded with a withering stare and shifted his gaze out the window to the passing farms. "Beadell wrote some books about it. I thought they were a fun read."

"Are we going to be travelling on any of his roads?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it."

"So... you're telling me about this because....?"

"This guy picked the nuclear test sites and they're not that far from Ben's travels. Beadell's books painted a pretty good picture of what to expect out there." Alex stretched his legs as far as they would reach in the foot well, and then relaxed. He grinned. "I'm finally going to see it for myself."

Again, Tessa flexed her stiff fingers on the steering wheel. "I'm stopping soon. It's your turn." A sign flashed passed. It flagged the presence of a nearby rest stop.

The bay was tight, with a cracked picnic table, a rubbish bin and not much else. The ground seethed with ants, angry at the hot tyres that

had disrupted their world. Next to the car the bin was overfull and only partially closed. A pair of crows perched on its lid, ignoring the arrivals and focused upon extracting its contents through the gap. For all its failings, the bay was still a safe place to open doors and swap seats. A cluster of road trains thundered past, each one a monster hauling three long trailers.

After the swap, Alex flipped his turn signal and resumed the 110 kph limit before more trucks could tailgate them.

Adelaide was far behind. Farm houses were fewer and the spaces between them stretched. Fields remained yellow with the stubble of the last harvest. At Port Augusta they refreshed fuel and sandwich packs. These they ate on the road. The highway took them around the northern tip of the gulf. Signs of habitation dwindled further and roadsides were no longer fenced. Heavy cloud had been with them for much of the day, but it wasn't cold. Good weather for travelling.

Tessa and Alex continued to change places on the hour. Apart from evading the occasional roo carcass, the drive was free of challenges.

The terrain had completely flattened out. Australians growing up along coastal areas were familiar with rolling hills and forests and grew up with the impression that hills were universal. Few had bothered to travel the outback and would never experience the strange sensation of gliding over an ocean of land on four wheels and a strip of bitumen.

Ceduna was a welcome stop. The town was an oasis between coastal desert and the open ocean. A plain but functional motel signposted Vacancies. Here they stopped for a long sleep and arose late, right on the maximum departure time. Just outside their door a dour woman with a trolley of sheets and toilet rolls was frowning at their tardiness as they conveyed their luggage back to the car.

After Ceduna, the next town of substance was 1200 kilometres distant in Western Australia, but they were not going that far.

With Ceduna a hundred kilometres behind them, Alex looked across an increasingly stunted landscape. Tessa was behind the wheel. The few kangaroos that they saw were taller than the surrounding vegetation. Occasionally a group of emus were spotted, moving as a tight group.

"Jeez... there's not a lot out here. Not a good place for a breakdown."

Tessa was concerned. "Is that likely to happen?"

"No. Maintenance is up to date. We ought to be fine, but that's not a guarantee. It's just probability."

"Ben Caslow made the trip in his old Holden and did okay. Does that make him brave or stupid?"

"Certainly brave, but not stupid. Most early cars were pretty basic. A box of spare parts, fluids, tools and a bit of fencing wire would sort out most problems." Alex patted the dashboard of his modern vehicle. "With these babies, if the software Gods decide they're not happy for some reason, no amount of fencing wire and duct tape will help."

"If you're trying to make me feel better, it isn't working."

They kept driving.

The plan was to reach the Yalata truck stop late in the afternoon.

Yalata wasn't a town as such. It was a cluster of buildings north of the highway with a complicated history. Alex had looked it up before the trip began. "There's an aboriginal settlement at Yalata. Its history isn't good. In the 1920's and 30's, the government forcibly moved the aboriginal population to outback missions next to the overland railway line. Ideological differences between the missions were a problem. When nuclear tests began, they were all forcibly moved again. This time to Yalata."

"I can't see how any of that will affect our plan."

"Maybe indirectly. The original roadhouse at Yalata was closed a long time ago, but it seems we can still buy self-serve fuel there. When we leave the highway, I want a full tank and I want to keep the jerry

cans as backup. The track to the north starts at the Yalata settlement. To us, it won't seem like anyone is paying attention, in these small communities, people always note the movement of strangers, even if they are just tourists. We can't hide, but we can create a false impression."

From the highway Yalata presented itself as two long shipping containers, painted white and set centrally in a broad yard. One box dispensed diesel only and the other provided petrol. Both had prominent signs warning drivers to choose the correct fuel. This was no place to accidentally mix petrol and diesel. Nobody was in attendance and they were required to scan a credit card to arm the pump. Tessa used a general purpose credit card linked to the law firm. The fuel price was very high.

Alex removed his fuel cap, inserted the filler hose and pulled the trigger. It actively vibrated in his hand, confirming the flow of fuel. Not for the first time this trip, hoped that the fuel he was buying was clean. Contaminants could trash their travel plans.

Tessa wound down her window and watched the numbers on the pump display climb. "Why do they call these pumps Bowsers?"

The flow was steady and would be for the next few minutes. He looked up from the pump. "Bowser was the name of the American inventor that made fuel pumps maybe a century ago. Back then there were hundreds of 'Bowser' pumps around Australia. After the stock market crash of '29 the Australian government put high tariffs on imported machinery. In retaliation the Bowser company shut down its operations here. Aussies still call fuel pumps by the trade name

'browser' without thinking about it." He grinned. "Much the same way that British like to *Hoover* their carpets."

Tessa wondered, not for the first time, how her husband managed to pull out this obscure information on demand. Sometimes she would covertly look up his facts on the internet, but so far, he'd always been right.

With refuelling complete, Alex drove a slow circuit of the wide space surrounding the two containers. There were no buildings, just a tall fence to the North partially concealing a derelict campground. He put the car back on the bitumen and followed the Highway further west.

After only two kilometres they entered another derelict wayside stop. It was large, but otherwise unremarkable. Like so many others, it had a cluster of well-spaced trees, a rubbish bin, and a sad looking picnic table. Beyond the trees a network of rutted tracks ran into the distance. The place was an informal staging area for anyone wanting to sleep for a few hours. Truck drivers were compelled to take rest breaks after fixed intervals behind the wheel, but right now their vehicle was the only one at the site. It was perfect for what Alex had in mind. The afternoon dragged on and they prepared an early meal. Thick cloud gathered and dusk came early. After every few minutes another gargantuan road train would thunder past, sidelights blazing like some kind of high-speed fairground ride.

This would be their point of departure from the main road, where they plan to enter the desert proper. Even in Melbourne, Alex had felt a strong need for caution. His preference was to get in and out quietly, leaving as few clues of their presence as possible. While

invisibility is impossible, misdirection would be the next best thing. The real adventure was about to begin.

As the last of the daylight fled, they broke out the bag of big letters and reflective tape. An enormous '024' was magnetically attached to the bonnet. Other numbers were placed on the sides above long lime-green reflective stripes. In minutes the white utility was transformed into a generic mining company vehicle.

For a finishing touch, Alex peeled the backing self-adhesive film off a bogus number plate he'd laser printed. This he smoothed over his own Victorian registration. Tessa had queried Alex about this. "Are you sure this is necessary? It seems pretty illegal to me."

"Maybe it's a waste of time, but who knows? We could be seen and Victorian plates are a bit distinctive out here. I looked at a Western Australian car sales website until I found a car of this model and colour, then recorded the registration number in the advert. Certainly it would slow down anyone looking up our details. We're still in South Australia and the local authorities don't have easy access to Western Australian databases. "It's just a bit more misdirection. We're going to a place we aren't supposed to be. Who knows what sorts of secret cameras are out there. If it turns out that we didn't need the disguise, then fine, but I'd rather be careful than caught."

They stayed in the car, relaxing and occasionally snoozing until deep into the night. At 2am Alex started the car and eased out of the

parking space.

Chapter 13

They worked their way back towards Yalata and quietly drove up the dirt road that skirted the fuel station. It was a heavily trafficked corrugated section. Half a kilometre to the north, the road ran up the side of the aboriginal settlement for which the place was actually named. Small houses and huts fronted the road, most with their lights out. Alex eased past all of this. Despite the late hour, their presence was almost certainly noted. The settlement ended abruptly and they found themselves on a wide track cut through unfenced scrub. He picked up the pace. This was the beginning of the trail Ben Caslow had recorded within his GPS tracker all those years ago. Insects rose and cut across the beams of their headlights. Occasionally they startled a roo that had been feeding on the short grasses at the edge of the trail and it would crash away through the undergrowth. It was a mild night and the car heater was unnecessary. They kept at it for another two hours before Alex pronounced himself too weary to carry on. Tessa had already made a pillow of her jacket and was dozing away.

When Alex next opened his eyes it was full daylight. Lots of muscles were protesting. Cars were made for driving not for sleeping. Tessa, still with her head on the jacket, had her eyes open and was watching him. She yawned. "Are we there yet?"

"Not even close." Alex opened his door and stepped out. He relieved himself on a bush and looked about. The remoteness was tangible.

They had come to rest on a sand ridge of rust-brown soil. Waves of stunted growth, bushes and tall grass, barely a metre tall, radiated in all directions. There was no wind and he had to shuffle his feet in order to be reminded that sound was a thing which still existed in this world.

They stretched some more, gnawed on a muesli bar each and returned to the car. In the new light their vehicle really did look like a fleet car from a mining company. Alex started the engine and they rolled on. His own GPS had been pre-loaded with waypoints from coordinates extracted from Ben's device.

"Our next stop is Ooldea."

"It sounds like a disease. Is there a cream you can get for that?"

"Don't let any locals hear you say that – if you can find any. Actually Ooldea is a pretty famous place. We'll keep heading north until we hit the Transcontinental Railway. That's where we find Ooldea. It was a rail siding and watering hole. It's also the starting point on the road to Maralinga where the Brits tested nukes in the fifties, but we're not going there."

Alex lowered the driver side window and perched his elbow on the sill, enjoying the fresh bushland air. A plume of dust rose behind them, but as long as they were moving, it was clear up front. "The Australian Prime Minister visited Ooldea once. It was a big deal at the time. There was a thing around 1900 when Western Australia was a

bit keen to secede and form a separate country. To stop this, the federal government made a deal to build a railway from Perth to Adelaide. They started at both ends and the tracks met here at Ooldea. With much fanfare the Prime Minister came out by train in 1917 and declared the railway open."

Tessa added this information to a growing pile of trivia in her mind. "Wow, the fun never stops in the desert." The dirt track before them formed a straight line to the horizon. "...and they've done so much with the place since then."

The sun was high by the time they rolled into what was Ooldea. It was split by a single rail line track on concrete sleepers. Few traces of a settlement remained. A short distance from the track a cyclone fence circled a portable building topped by antennas. It was probably tied to railway operations.

"There..." Alex pointed to a trail on the far side of the line. "That maintenance track should follow the railway to the east. By Ben's nav log, we stick with it for about seventy kilometres."

They mounted the line on a ramp of crushed rock and paused to look in each direction. Sleepers and shiny-topped rails stretched east and west to infinity. He didn't dawdle on the tracks. Although visibility was great, it felt dangerous. Alex shared another nugget of information. "Apparently it is not far from here where the world's longest straight railway track starts. Nearly five hundred kilometres without a bend."

"Sounds like double-speak for 'world's most boring train ride'. Is that a thing?"

"Not here. That record belongs to any train ride in suburban Melbourne. On this line travellers can play the Camel Game. That's where you try to see how many camels you can spot in an hour, then try to break that record."

"Riveting."

For all of its remoteness, the maintenance trail was in fair condition and they made good time. There were minor undulations and diversions around soft spots, but nothing to prevent a steady pace.

Twenty minutes later they were both stunned by an amazingly loud horn blast and the sound of hundreds of singing steel wheels, mere metres from their car.

Tessa yelled "Fuck!" and cupped her hands over her ears.

The Indian Pacific had snuck up behind them and thundered past at triple their speed. A thousand faces, many with waving hands peered at them through the windows for the sheer novelty of seeing the first humans in hours of travel. It was an extraordinarily long train. Three powerful diesel-electric loco's at the front and one and a half kilometres of long carriages trundling behind in relative luxury. The

end of the train had a group of split level and flatbed wagons full of cars and some with caravans. A convenience for those who wanted to make the two thousand kilometre journey to Adelaide, without the chore of having to drive themselves.

Alex kept his window up and was glad for the disguise he'd applied to the car. After what seemed like an eternity, the last carriage pulled away and the only sounds to be heard came from their own engine.

A short distance later the railway split into two, the area widened and a white sign announced their arrival at Bates Siding. It was incredibly quiet. Apart from the passing train, they hadn't seen a soul since leaving the main highway.

Tessa was following their position on the screen. "Somewhere around here there should be a track heading north." Bits of bent metal and rolling stock wheels were strewn about and a mess of old tracks had been dumped haphazardly like giant fireplace kindling. It took a while to locate, but they found a trail heading directly into the scrub through a closed double gate. It was visibly chained at the centre. Alex overshot this to park on a stony patch.

There he left his seat and made way towards the back of the car. It was time for the next level of disguise. From the rear he extracted a bag containing four woollen wheel covers that John the upholsterer had prepared. The covers were quick to attach and were held tight by elastic straps, like a fluffy set of snow chains. The old man had done a fine job.

Back in the car, it was Tessa's turn behind the wheel. She reversed a short distance and slowly approached the double gates. That it was a double gate held some significance. Nobody would fit double gates where a single one would suffice. Such an arrangement would only be needed for extremely wide loads.

Alex approached the chained gates with his battery-operated grinder. The chain already had three padlocks in series. A common enough occurrence. The grinder sliced through a link next to a padlock he hurled the two halves deep into the undergrowth. After Tessa passed through the gate, he re-attached the chain with a fresh padlock of his own. The gate now had four locks. This was a much less conspicuous arrangement than leaving an unlocked gate behind them.

Looking at the ground, Alex was pleased to confirm that there was no tyre marks where the car had driven. Nothing had been disturbed. The covers were working well.

Fifty metres along the trail a weathered but intimidating sign alerted that they were entering federal protected land and entry was prohibited. Tessa eased past this with some trepidation.

Trespass on prohibited lands was something she would tell clients to avoid, yet here she was, crossing a line. She grimaced and tightened her mouth.

Alex looked at her. "You right? It's not too late to bail."

She shook her head. "No this is the only way forward. Let's get in and out of here as fast as we can."

Another hundred metres up the track there was a disconcerting squeal from the dashboard and Tessa brought the vehicle to an immediate halt.

"That's our proximity alarm Tess. There is a detector coil planted in the track ahead of us." He pointed out a gap in the foliage to the right. "Go that way, we have to get around their sensor. The vegetation was sparse enough to run parallel with the track. They passed a small solar panel mounted shoulder height on a stubby pole. "That panel powers their road sensor. Go another twenty metres and work your way back to the track." He grinned and patted his homemade detector with reverence. "That was totally worthwhile."

"You think that if we had triggered an alarm, the place would have been crawling with police?"

"Hardly. Maybe they'd send up a light plane to check us out. More probably they would get one of the regional contractors to come up and poke around. That could take a day. I hope we will be out of here before then. The more quietly we tread, the better I'll feel."

Back on the track they paused to remove the wheel covers. While good in moderation, they wouldn't last long on an extended path. It was wide and straight. Wider than any other track since the main highway, but badly overgrown at the edges. The track traversed a long series of tall sand ridges. Some work had been put into this to cut the ridges to half-height and ramp either side of them. Grasses had taken over and provided a degree of traction.

At the peak of one ridge, Tessa pointed forward. "There! Something is sticking up."

Almost directly in line with the track a dark stick reached for the sky. They kept going. With every ridge it grew larger, then suddenly the ridges stopped and below them a fenced compound appeared. Perhaps a dozen portable buildings of various shapes were scattered behind the fence and half a kilometre beyond this a grey tower rose from the flat expanse of a salt pan.

This was the sight they had come for. Alex stopped at the crest and took some images.

At the bottom of the ridge, the track split into two. A straight path led directly to gates at the compound. A wide track to the right skirted the compound and continued to the tower site.

As they approached the main gate, the coil alarm buzzed harshly again. Another vehicle sensor lay ahead. Tessa looked questioningly

at Alex. He nodded. "Okay, let's come back to this. First we'll fit the woollen wheel covers again, then we'll check out the tower."

He reversed to the split in the track, re-fitted the covers and followed the fork to the tower site.

The construct was utterly out of place, like a giant Jenga puzzle of stacked blocks, topped by a dark, indistinct shape, edged with wooden hand rails. Their track swung on a slight arc to the east and a second tower was exposed behind the first. This structure was an odd wedge shape of galvanised metal reaching about same height as the timber tower. It had a spiralled metal staircase attached to one face. The side of the tower supported a broad cable tray which descended towards a concrete slab that probably once held a portable building.

They parked next to the wooden tower and silently gazed up at its enormity. Rough cut wooden steps extended from the core into the dirt before them. Alex gazed into the dark interior. The treads rotated out of sight. It was a *spiral* staircase. Loose sand had blown partially across the bottom tread. Tessa approached and began to drag some of it away with the tip of her shoe. Alex moved in and helped. A coarse engraving encrusted with dirt was exposed. It said *Angela*.

Chapter 14

Ben Caslow stood with his shoulder to a tree. It wasn't a very large tree and it quivered with his weight. Still, it provided a modicum of shade on what had become another blistering day. The scene before him at Bates Siding was a tangled mess. Railway truck wheels, torn from the carriages were scattered between bent sections of track and smashed concrete sleepers. It was obvious that something had gone badly wrong here and the rolling stock was a scene of destruction. It would have been tragic if it hadn't been fake. The obvious mayhem was ignored by the fifteen or so men at the scene.

A mobile crane had been set up next to the undamaged main line. It conveyed the long container sized boxes from flatbed carriages to waiting truck trailers. As Ben watched, another loaded truck pulled away from the crane and made for the gap in the tree line towards the tower site. An empty truck was already moving into position to receive the next load. The crane tooted its horn twice. This was a sign. The main locomotive, now out of sight down the track, gave a deep honk in return. Its engine briefly roared, couplings clanked and the train lurched forward the length of a single carriage, bringing the next load within reach of the still swinging chains dangling from the apex of the crane.

On the previous afternoon there had been a briefing in the mess hall. The cook sat next to Ben with his arms folded. He would occasionally lean over and whisper humorous, sometimes derogatory comments during the proceedings. Sergeant Lipton stood at the front of the room, basking in the importance of the speaker, a dour, humorous colonel looking very much like a discount Admiral Tarkin of Star Wars fame was doing most of the talking.

"...as HQ has declared this to be a secret project, unorthodox measures have been taken. Our loads are unusual and will arrive by rail. We needed to shift these loads without the public becoming

curious. A small derailment has been faked at Bates siding, so that the entire line can be shut down for 24 hours. Railway scrap has been scattered about at the Siding to maintain the illusion of an actual derailment. All the timber boxes and steel tower sections leave Adelaide after dark, under the guise of a track service operation. Also on the train are six large trucks and their drivers. They' will be responsible for carting our materials from the siding to the claypan. They'll go back on the train tomorrow night."

Cook leaned towards Ben and whispered. "I hope these drivers like tinned beef sandwiches, or they're going to be very hungry. I'm not giving them our good stuff."

"If you make me a pizza, I promise to eat it in front of them."

"Done."

Lipton, becoming aware of their mumbled whispers, glared sternly in their direction.

"Shh!" Ben whispered, "Sarge is giving us the stink-eye. Better look interested." Ben met the sergeant's withering gaze with a smile and a wink.

The colonel had almost finished. "Tomorrow morning, all work crews will be at the siding at first light. You have your schedule. It will be a long day. Questions?" There were none.

On the following morning, Ben was simply an observer. It had been made clear that he was to confine his work to the staircase construction, a task still in its infancy. Leaving the relative concealment of the tree, Ben climbed into his nearby ute. The cracked leather was hot and threatened to burn exposed skin below his shorts. After waiting for the dust to settle, he followed the latest truck back to the claypan.

The construction site presented chaos of a different type. Equipment and wooden crates scatted about as though some giant toddler had up-ended their favourite bag of blocks upon the ground.

A large concrete pad in the shape of an 'H' had been cast at the tower site. The two long sides of this shape matched the dimensions of the wooden crates steadily arriving. They had been built to shipping container dimensions for handling convenience. Ben had worked with the architects, describing how they could be built without metal without compromising strength. A square hole had been left in each corner to receive immense wooden pegs. These would key between the stacked layers that alternated for each level. The hollow core would contain Ben's spiral staircase, but it had to be prepared in sync with each new added layer. One full turn of the stair for each two-layers of boxes. The completed six-turn staircase would be encased by 24 crates, capped by a large wooden platform with an access hole in the centre. The site crane could only reach halfway. A heavy lift helicopter had been requisitioned to finish the job.

Back in Adelaide, Ben had been insistent that the design would be top-heavy and needed serious guying. He knew that high winds could build up in the desert with little warning and this could put the project at risk. Ben knew that steel cable couldn't be used, It had to be non-conductive. He suggested they buy in heavy nylon hawsers, normally used for securing ships in ports. It would be extraordinarily

expensive. Now at the site, he spotted a row of immense reels containing the synthetic rope. It was obvious that the budget was unrestricted. He wondered not for the first time, if he could have held out for a higher contractor price.

Behind the main tower, the steel counterpart was to be erected barely a hundred metres away. This structure was to support the special antenna intended to focus the massive electromagnetic pulses. At the last briefing, they were told by a gaunt and nervous looking scientist that the electronic blasts would be oriented away from the compound, lest they trash the electrical appliances that everyone relied upon. That aspect of the project was mostly a mystery and Ben was happy for it to remain that way. What these tech nerds did with their finished toy was none of his business. Ben's aim was to finish the job fast, get back to civilisation and get paid. Certainly, he was intrigued by the challenge the construction posed, but its coarse finish was an affront to his skills as an artisan of staircases. Would Da Vinci be content to paint white lines in a car park? Kurt Vonnegut write burger menus for McDonalds? It was well that the project would remain secret, as he wasn't keen to be associated with this monstrosity.

Leaving the claypan behind, Ben completed the circuit to his workspace between shipping containers. The specified timber was stacked and waiting for him. His plan was to construct a round column of heavy timbers to form the newel core. The approach had been appropriated from the bold axemen of yesteryear. They would axe-cut rough slots in a tree to receive hardwood planks and progressively climb to great heights in a tree canopy. Ben was able to machine similar slots with high accuracy. The principle was the same. As weight was applied, the planks would lock into position, without the need for metal bolts or nails. The extended tips of the planks would be joined with diagonal slats tied with plastic bolts. These

would in turn support a handrail. As soon as a single turn had been fabricated, it would be transported from his workspace to the claypan then be inserted into the central void of the waiting tower. As with most of his designs, the first level would be tricky. The rest was simply repetition.

Not much was going to happen in his workspace today. In the morning the real work would begin. The sun was high and under his shirt, he could feel beads of perspiration trying to form a path down his chest. Ben extracted a wheel brace from the tool kit in the back of his car and made his way back to his accommodation block. The room was warm. The first task was to work the controls of the air conditioner. Relief was immediate.

As everyone else was busy at their assigned tasks, this was a good opportunity to add a fresh entry to his diary. The first weeks on site had been quiet and it had amused Ben to make subtle changes to the clothes drawer next to the bed. He looked to it now. A hex nut protruded from both sides, but the one on the right, closest to the bed was a dummy, present only for symmetry. He placed the wheel brace over the remaining nut and worked it clockwise, as though it were being tightened. The rectangular top of the drawer, complete with bedside lamp, began to rotate anti-clockwise, pivoting on a rear corner. A cavity between the moving panel and the topmost drawer was exposed revealing the red cover of his diary and a spare pencil in the shallow space. He retrieved the folder and began to detail some fresh notes.

Chapter 15

Alex looked at Tessa and she nodded once. There was no doubt now that they were in the right place. This was Ben's work. Together they looked up. It was a weird structure that reached to the sky. A tall city apartment block, tied to the ground in each corner by long, slack cables, except there were no rooms, no windows and it was made from wood. It was difficult to say against the plain blue sky, but it seemed to sway. The odd bulbous shape at the top protruded slightly. Whatever it was, it appeared to be somewhat larger than the platform which supported it.

The doorway before them beckoned. There was no gate or restrictive chain, just a path into the void. To the right of the entrance an odd artefact had been screwed to the wall. Alex recognised the device and rotated the latch at its centre. A faded message in a tiny window went from VACANT to OCCUPIED. It was a toilet door latch, mounted far from any door. Alex smirked and rotated it back to *vacant*. A crude device, probably intended to flag whether or not the platform was in use. He stepped back. Above the latch someone had crudely chiselled the words '*STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN*'. A nostalgic chuckle escaped his lips. He smiled and passed the palm of his hand over the rough surface of the words.

Tessa raised a hand palm up, gesturing at the wall of spiral steps that disappeared into gloom. "Shall we?"

At the second tread, they paused to look behind. A rectangle of daylight framed a yellowed salt pan and a blue sky in equal measure, like the compressed image of a Ukrainian flag. They continued the ascent. Thin beams of sunlight broke through whatever gaps it could find, creating bright spots of light with indistinct, fuzzy edges. Apart from the scuff sounds of accumulated dust, the wood was sufficiently

dense to mask their footsteps. The way forward was still solid. Most corners and ledges around the shaft supported a bird's nest, or the remains of one. Spiders too had been busy and defunct webs hung down in filthy streamers. It was an odd experience. A stair without landings that went on and on. Instinctively, they held hands, lest one or the other lost balance along the way. Soon enough, they had to pause to catch their breath.

Tessa panted. "I've never been here before, but it feels familiar."

"Have you ever visited a lighthouse?"

"Yes. Once, a long time ago. A school trip to Point Hicks. There were metal steps that rang as I climbed." Ignoring the burning sensation from stressed calf muscles, they continued. "I'm pretty sure it was a lot cleaner than this."

The air outside was breezy, moving around motes of dust that arose from their tread falls.

The climb seemed interminable, then without warning the stair levelled out, traversed a few metres in a small corridor. At the end of this, a short set of treads ascended into what looked like the inside of an immense crate. A door blocked the path. It was a simple affair of slats and wooden pegs, with plenty of light showing through the gaps. The door was pinned top and bottom by large dowels rather than hinges and locked by a sliding wooden bar that keyed into a receptacle. The portal had a distinct medieval feel. Alex grasped a

hand grip, pulled it sideways and pressed hard. The door opened outwards onto a large, square platform.

The space before them was totally dominated by an enormous aircraft fuselage. It straddled the entire deck diagonally, with the nose still hanging over the edge of the platform by a full metre. Wing tips had been removed back to jet engine cowlings. Unmistakably, it was a military aircraft, painted in an extremely dark khaki. The many labels and 'no step' messages were all sun affected and faded. The rest of the platform supported a low railing which may once have been solid, but looked none too safe now. The flooring was grey and weathered, like an old jetty, but firm. As long as the white ants were kept at bay, the desert climate was favourable to hardwoods. That the tower was still standing at all was an indicator that the chosen timber was not termite friendly.

The only other feature on the platform was the access box from which they had just emerged. The view beyond the aircraft was spectacular. On two sides scrubby trees merged into the horizon, interrupted by long lines of sand ridges, trying to break through the vegetation.

To the north, the claypan, completely devoid of plant life, stretched away from the tower site for at least a kilometre. The sky above and around them was a blue expanse that kept tugging for attention. Long ropes radiated from the four corners of the tower, anchored to indistinct blocks in the distance. The ropes were somewhat stretched and sagged low. The entire platform gently swayed within that slack, it was an unnerving sensation, like being on the upper deck of a boat. The ropes appeared furry and sun affected. One day a rope would fail and the tower would plummet in the opposite direction. It had been up a long time. Today was not that day.

The top of the adjacent steel tower was nearby. It had a small galvanised mesh platform which supported a peculiar antenna, clearly oriented in their direction. Next to this was an enigmatic grey metal box, mechanically shuttered. Another curious relic.

Alex walked to the aircraft fuselage. It was utterly out of place, high in the sky on this platform of wood. He curled fingers around the lip of the engine cowling and looked inside. It was empty. "They probably stripped the jet turbines and landing gear to reduce weight. Even so, it would have been a gargantuan task to install this beast up here."

Tessa was equally awed, but had no experience with aircraft up close. "What are we looking at here?"

"It's a Canberra Bomber. I recognise the shape. The Brits and Australian Air Force used these for a very long time. I guess it made sense to use one for their experiments."

Tessa extracted her phone from a pocket. "I have to get some pictures of this."

Alex placed one hand over hers. "Wait. Keep it turned off. If we do get caught out here, you don't want these images on your phone. It's too hard to purge them from memory." He pulled his small digital camera from a pocket. The type a tourist would use before phones had cameras. "If we use this, I can stash the SD memory somewhere safe much easier than you can hide your phone." He began taking

still images from different angles then placed a finger to his lips in the 'keep silent' gesture, switched to video and panned the camera, taking in live footage, all while keeping Tessa behind him. There was no point in adding proof of her presence at this classified site.

Alex lowered the camera and let it dangle by the wrist strap. "I'm seeing a similar setup to what I read about at the American test site. They'd set up the jet with a full set of instruments as though it were in flight." He pointed at the steel tower. "That gizmo would blast pulses at the jet and they would try to see if the damage was sufficient to bring the jet down, or if it did, they could alter the shielding until it survived. Still, I'd not believed it hadn't seen it for myself."

"Wouldn't it have been easier for them to figure out what would happen through simulations, or a scale model? That way they wouldn't have had to build all this nonsense." Tessa gestured to the aluminium monster perched in front of them.

"Yes and no. When electronics screw up, it's always the weakest link that kills a system, even if the unit is really tough. To find vulnerabilities, you have to make live tests. Probably an Oxford academic in a wood-panelled office somewhere in Britain sketched a plan and passed it to a supervisor. Everything that happened after that occurred automatically, because nobody in the chain of command had the balls to say *'This is stupid. Don't do it.'*

"So, what's next?"

Alex looked to the ground. From this height the compound was in plain view. He pointed. "We go there."

They retraced their steps down the stairwell, paused to take some more pictures, including the inscription on the bottom step. They retreated back to where the car had tripped the road alarm, but no further. He parked in the shade.

Alex gathered up his portable grinder once more and they walked to the gate. This one only had two padlocks on the chain. The sound of the grinder rang loud. Now there were three locks.

They moved to the open space between buildings. There were choices. The closest building was also the largest. Together they peered through the window. It was a mess hall. Chairs were inverted on the tables for floor cleaning. The kitchen beyond had been stripped. Nothing to see here. They moved to the next building. An admin office. Alex tried the door. It wasn't locked. He pushed and it opened inwards, but again it had been gutted. All that remained were some small folding tables and spartan wire-frame chairs. Somebody had done a thorough cleaning job before the base was abandoned.

The next building was the first of the accommodation blocks. Again not locked. The open door led them into the short corridor. Four dormitory rooms faced them. Each door had a frame for a name card, but no name card. Each held a stripped bed, empty drawer and an air conditioner grille. The pattern repeated for the next block and the chances of recovering any useful information appeared slim. On the third block. Tessa pointed to the door and froze. In the frame where a place card should be, the name 'Ben' had been drawn in marker pen. The excitement was short lived. In the room was another

stripped bed, another chest of drawers and another air conditioning grille.

Alex pointed to the grille. "In movies, people hide things behind air conditioning grilles." Using fingernails, he started on one corner and with a pop, the grill came away from the wall. The room light was good but it showed nothing behind the grill that wasn't part of an old air conditioner. Finding something at this stage was practically too good to be true. He slammed the grille back in place. "C'mon, let's keep moving."

At the end of the hall, he tugged on the exit door, began to descend...and paused. "Wait. Something's not right." Alex returned to look again in Ben's room, compared it to the equally barren adjacent room, then returned to Ben's space once more.

"Do you see it?"

Tessa Peered into the room again, perplexed. "No. It looks the same as the rest. Anything personal is long gone."

"Look at the dresser."

Tessa looked more closely. Removed the three drawers, inverted them. They were clean. The cavity left behind the drawers was equally barren. Nothing was under or behind the drawers. She slid them back. "I've got nothing."

"Cast your mind back to Bruny Island. Ben built a secret space into the rear wall which could only be accessed with a tool to rotate a bolt head." Alex pointed to the sides. "Why does this drawer set have two hex nuts on the side, when they are missing from every other drawer we've seen?"

Her eyes widened. Tessa grasped one of the nuts, but it spun freely between her fingers. The other was stuck solid.

"Wait here." Alex disappeared for about three minutes and returned at a trot bearing a standard cross-style wheel brace. On the third try, he found the end of the brace that was a good fit. "I should have guessed. 7/16 inch, the same wheelnut size as the old Holden." The nut rotated smoothly. With equal ease, the top of the drawer rotated through a quarter turn and a shallow cavity was revealed. It contained a single item. A notepad with a red cover.

Alex leafed through it. About a quarter of the pages had close-spaced handwriting.

Tessa was excited and hugged her husband. "I knew there was a reason why I married you."

"Yes but I thought it was for my rugged good looks and ability to lift heavy things."

Alex tucked the book into his belt. "I doubt we are going to find anything else." He rotated the top of the drawer back to its original position. "Let's get out of here."

Again they were about to step from the hallway to the outside, when there was a propeller roar from above. A high-wing light plane buzzed the camp. It was pure white and flying low. They retreated into the room and waited. The sound faded, then came back for another pass. Then one more. This time it faded out entirely, towards the south.

"Do you think it saw us?"

"I don't know. I parked well under a tree, but it's a white car. It's possible. Time to leave."

They retraced steps through the compound gate. Alex snapped the new lock shut and wiped all of them down with a rag. It was an old lock that didn't look out of place. The surface of the compound was hard and there were no obvious footprints. Any brisk wind blowing through the camp would obscure all traces of their presence within minutes.

They took the car down the track to the south, back towards the siding, but after a short distance Alex went bush and came to a halt about a hundred metres from the track.

"There's a good hour of daylight left. Maybe they'll make another pass. Let's hang out here for a while." Alex recovered a plastic tarpaulin from the rear of the vehicle. It was a basic hardware store item, black on one side and dull silver on the other. They went with silver-side up, believing that this colour would blend in better with the surrounding silver-grey undergrowth. Working together they quickly expanded the sheet to full size and draped it over the car.

Sitting in the car under the tarp was quite dark. They hadn't eaten for some time, so Tessa broke out some sandwiches, but remained agitated by the flyover. "Did we trip an alarm?"

He shrugged. "It's difficult to say. We weren't there for long. If we'd activated an alarm at the site, there wouldn't have been enough time to send someone this far out on such short notice. Maybe somebody spotted us at Yalata and got nervous. Perhaps the train driver reported a car on the track by radio. I don't know. One thing's for sure, the less the information they have about us, the better off we are."

There was a far off droning sound. Against the afternoon sky the same aircraft had returned. This time it followed the track coming from the siding at a greater height. They peered carefully from under the tarp as the plane drew closer. It passed overhead without hesitation, then broke East and disappeared from sight once more.

They waited another hour and concluded that it wouldn't be coming back today. The sun was near the horizon and the chances of an aircraft spotting something out of place in the twilight were remote. Working in the dim light, the tarpaulin was packed and back on the track, they continued South.

It was dark by the time they passed through the gate at the siding. Their new lock had not been disturbed. After re-locking it, they retraced their way along the railway track. When a hard patch of gravel was spotted, they paused to remove the remains of the lambswool wheel covers and stored them in the back. The covers had become threadbare and somewhat ratty, but they had done their job.

Their headlights revealed a family of emus gathered on the track. They ranged from adult birds to juveniles. Though startled, they formed a tight group and walked slowly down the track away from the car, but refused to leave the track. Alex followed them at low speed, willing them to get out the way, but it wasn't happening. Not far from where they had first encountered the Indian Pacific, a goods train travelling in the reverse direction rumbled into view. This startled the birds and they ran sideways into the scrub. It was an extremely long train, difficult to quantify in the dark, but probably a couple of kilometres long, mostly carrying container stock. It took a full ten minutes before the last truck rattled past. If someone from the previous train had called in their first encounter, there was a fair chance the driver here would do it again.

Under starlight and a half-moon, they left the railway at Ooldea and pointed south back towards the highway, still a few hour's drive away. They travelled slowly, using only parking lights for illumination.

Tessa called out. "Wait. I saw something flash up ahead in the distance."

Alex had been focused on the near-distance trying to spot more wildlife and had missed the flash. "I didn't see anything. Are you sure?"

"Yes. There it is again."

About a kilometre away lights had flashed from a vehicle travelling towards them at a time and place when such a presence was unlikely. The scrub here was sparse and Alex drove headlong into it for more than a hundred metres where they couldn't be seen. They stopped and killed the lights. Alex left the vehicle and made his way back towards the track, laying low about twenty metres short of it. His dark clothing made it very unlikely he'd be spotted.

It took an uncomfortable fifteen minutes before the vehicle trundled past. It was a distinctive white Land-Rover Troopie with chequered signage and *Federal Police* printed on its sides. It passed without hesitation and Alex withdrew back to his own car.

Before reversing his car out of the scrub, he extracted a full roll of duct tape and formed a large patch over each of his tail lamps. Tessa walked behind the car with a hand torch, illuminating the way back to the track through the gloom. The moonlight helped.

Once on the track, Alex restored his headlights and increased speed. The tape on his tail lights prevented the vehicle behind them from spotting the giveaway red dots disappearing into the distance. Out here any light at all would be a red flag for someone moving around.

They made good time and returned to the main highway without further mishap. Again they skirted the Yalata village. If they were spotted, they couldn't tell. Once on the bitumen they made for the same wayside stop they had used the night before.

Working in the dark they stripped the car of its fake numbering and reflective tape and carefully bagged it along with the now superfluous wheel covers. By now the desert air was quite cool. Alex felt a lot safer with the disguise out of the way. The wayside stop had several camp fireplaces dotted around. Tessa gathered deadwood and stacked it in one of them. Alex tore up an old magazine. And they got a fire going. There were no other vehicles in the stopover at that time, but plenty of east and westbound road trains were thundering past. Once the fire was past its peak they progressively fed it with the scrunched up remains of the car signage and wheel covers. To leave it behind in a bin could be a giveaway, likewise, if they were intercepted for whatever reason it was unwise to have such things on-board. With that task completed, they returned to the highway and drove through the night towards Ceduna. That strange mining company vehicle with its reflective numbers and fluorescent tape no longer existed. Now they were just another couple of tourists exploring the wide open spaces in a plain white car.

Chapter 16

Ben sat back in a folding camp chair in the workspace between the two containers that had been his home turf for the past three months. An open beer in a drink cooler was perched on a crate by his side. This was an essential part of his daily routine. From this spot he could lean back and see the top of his tower in the distance (which was how he thought of it now) and contemplate the construction. In the mornings it was the first object to light up with the rising sun and in the evenings, the edges would continue glow gold as the daylight faded at ground level.

It had been a tough job. One of the toughest. His work was mostly complete, with some detailing still required around the platform. Only yesterday the Canberra bomber had been lifted into position. That had been a sight to behold. The still airworthy craft had flown in from Adelaide using most of the claypan before rolling to a stop close to the tower base. From there, they drained the fuel tanks, cut the wings off and in two parts and lifted the fuselage to the platform with a heavy lift chopper flown in for the purpose. Airmen on the tower platform deftly bolted the two halves together. Its wings still remained on the ground, stacked to one side near the base of the tower, like something obscenely plucked from a large dragonfly.

Ben's program to annoy the staff sergeant had gone better than expected. The man was malicious to everyone he could reach. Delivering toxic abuse to underlings. Pointlessly ordering enlisted men to clean equipment that was already clean. Lipton was a sadist. He'd made several attempts to intimidate Ben in the same way, but Ben

was in a unique position where he could simply smile and ignore the demands. Twice Lipton had lodged complaints about Ben with the project commander, Air Commodore Davis, a career project manager who could see what was going on, but favoured inaction. In his office Davis had pleaded with Ben not to antagonise Sergeant Lipton. "Yes, but he's a dickhead" had been Ben's retort. "He's been trying to screw with me from day one and I'm not having it."

"Be that as it may, just try to stay clear of the man when you can." Davis was obviously busy trying to keep the project on schedule and didn't want to be drawn into petty complaints. Ben's construction work was on track and Davis knew it. As long as that was the case, he'd do little to interfere with his activities.

Not everything had gone so smoothly for all members of the team. That morning Ben had been walking past the admin office and caught the trailing end of an argument. Nolan his mild mannered neighbour was having a loud and somewhat abusive conversation with someone out of sight, but he couldn't figure out what was going down.

Nolan appeared in the gap between the containers, retrieved a folded chair that had been leaning against a wall and dropped heavily into it. Whatever had been bothering the man earlier was still taking its toll now. Ben recovered another beer from his cooler, pressed it into a foam sleeve and held it out. "You look like you could do with one of these."

Nolan nodded wordlessly and broke the seal.

“Who put a bug up your butt?”

Nolan shook his head in angst. “They won’t listen. What we’re doing is already scary enough, but they want more.”

Ben said nothing. Instead he took another sip and waited.

Nolan half-turned in his chair to look at Ben. They had become unlikely friends and the man felt the need to confide in someone. “I built the EMP generator, just the way I said I would. It makes one of the biggest field pulses ever produced, aimed directly at the bomber. That was the brief.”

“So what’s the problem now?”

“They want more. When we pulse the target they want to hit it with a hard radiation source at the same time.”

Ben had little understanding of this development. “What does that mean?”

“It means that they’ve brought in canisters of radioactive material that will be placed up the tower, next to my EMP antenna. When we fire an EMP pulse they want to blast the target with extra radiation to

see what will happen. This is really dangerous shit and I didn't sign up for it. I don't want to have anything to do with it."

For Ben this was academic, as when the tower was truly complete, he wasn't planning on hanging around.

"How is this all supposed to work? What does this EMP thing really do?"

"It works on different levels. There are temporary and permanent effects. The pulses we make are broad. They make a big noise up and down the radio spectrum. Signals won't get in or out until after the pulse has subsided. Radar, data and voice reception all gets knocked out for a few minutes over many kilometres. Then there is the local effect. The pulse induces large current flows into anything that contains wires. Some of the pulses will do nothing, but some of it will fry electronics. There are things that can be done to reduce the destruction. That's part of the test. They are filling the bomber with protected and unprotected electronics. They want to see what will survive and what they have to do to stop aircraft falling from the sky during a nuclear threat."

Much of this description was going over Ben's head, but he tried to be sympathetic. "I thought that there were all sorts of nuclear test bans in place to stop countries screwing around with this stuff."

"Yes, there are, but we're not setting off nuclear weapons we're just simulating them."

"Well, that sounds much safer then." Ben took a long pull from his drink. The air temperature had fallen with the setting sun and it was a pleasant time of the day to kick back and relax. Still, Ben could tell that his friend here remained agitated. "Alright, so what's this new danger that's got you so pissed? Is this EMP thing going to kill people?"

Nolan hesitated, unsure whether he was supposed to be speaking of such things to a civilian. Still, it was a fair assumption that if everyone at the camp didn't already have a major security clearance, they wouldn't be here. Ben's questions were innocent enough.

"In 1962 the Yanks dropped a nuke in the Pacific to see how big a pulse they could make. They called it *Starfish Prime* and it went off 250 miles in the air. This was less than a thousand miles from Hawaii. It was much more effective than they thought it would be. In Honolulu it knocked out power lines and damaged phone networks. It triggered fire alarms across the island."

"Ouch."

He kept going. "I'm not setting off a nuke, but I am creating focussed pulses to simulate the same conditions."

"I know we're in the desert but won't people hear it on radios around the country?"

"Oh for sure. There'll be static crashes across the spectrum. Radio hams will be pissed. If anyone bothers to complain, they'll be ignored. The official word will be to blame sunspots, or Russians. Maybe both."

"What about people? If it is going to fuck up radios and aircraft gear, what will it do to humans?"

"People ought to be fine unless they're wearing a pacemaker, or have a serious amount of metal in their bodies. No. These pulses shouldn't have much effect on human tissue, but focused, could make a headache. That's not what bothers me. But this new test..." he shook his head in disbelief. "They're mounting an extra box at the top of the steel tower with an active radiation source. These are bricks of contaminated graphite from spent nuclear fuel rods that the Brits quietly brought into the country. The new plan is that during the EMP test they'll lift a lead shutter and expose the target with a burst of hard radiation."

"Isn't that the same shit that killed people in Chernobyl?"

Nolan nodded. "It shouldn't be here. It shouldn't be anywhere near my tower."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. I've already told them that they're crazy. They agreed with me, but they're going to do it anyway."

To that Ben could only add a guarded "Oh." None of this was supposed to impact his job, but it was unsettling his friend here. Such radiation testing seemed unnecessarily dangerous.

"While we're at it, talk to me about Sargeant Lipton. Who gave him the shits?"

Nolan chuckled at that. "From what I'm hearing around the camp, that would be you."

"Nah. I'm just having fun. He's such a dick, he makes it easy. Seriously, what can you tell me about him?"

"I only know a little. He's a mean one alright. He'd been stationed at the Wagga air base for a while, but apparently rubbed a few people up the wrong way. They couldn't sack him, so they did the next best thing and sent him out here."

"Aren't we the lucky ones then."

"Ben, watch your back though. He's got a mean streak. If he can find a way to screw with you, he will."

"Point taken. The thing is, I've seen him dump agro on some of the younger guys in the camp and I don't like it. There's not much he can do to me, so I've been dishing out some payback for the greater good. Besides, there's not much else around here that's nearly as entertaining."

"Sure, but just be careful." He sighed and leaned back in the camp chair. The sun had already set at ground level and like Ben, he gazed idly at the line of sunlight creeping up the tower. "So how's your bit going? Testing is supposed to start in a couple of days, so you should be about done."

"Yeah, nearly there, then I'm outta this place." He raised a hand to point out an aspect of the job that neither of them could see. "There's still some hand rails to fit out and there's the doorway box at the top of the tower. *'Just put a door in it'* they said. *'Make sure it has a latch so the bloody wind doesn't blow it open'* they said. He dropped his arm and half-turned to look at Nolan. "Have you ever tried to make a hinged door and latch *without* any metal? "

Nolan conceded that he hadn't.

"Well, neither have I. I put something together which seems to work, it looks like an artefact from feudal England."

"I'm sure they had iron hinges back in feudal England."

"Alright. Gilligan's Island then."

"Mmm. Point taken."

The space around them began to darken. The two men sat in silence taking in the cooler evening air. Ben had revised his initial opinion of the man. Despite his squeaky voice and nervous demeanour, Nolan was smart and a man of substance. Ben put aside his beer and produced two wine glasses and a bottle of red. When a generous splash was placed in each, he passed one to his new friend and held the other. Eventually the top of the distant tower faded into darkness. Venus provided the first twinkle in the blue-black sky. An hour later the universe above was ablaze with stars, with the Milky Way forming a magnificent speckled band that traversed the horizons.

Ben wondered if Angela was looking at the same sky. Once the circus of the staging area in Adelaide had wrapped up, Angela took a few days of leave. She returned to the family farm, a small vineyard near Hahndorf in the South-East of the state. Angela had given him a few bottles of Shiraz from the farm before he left for the compound. The instructions were that if he liked it, she'd take him to its place of origin. He drained the last of his glass. It was good. No. The word good was insufficient. It was amazing. Ben was already longing to visit the source of such a fine product.

Chapter 17

It was a long drive through the night, but with Alex and Tessa taking turns, they reached Port Augusta by mid-morning. Without pausing for breakfast, they found a motel a short distance from the highway. The laundry carts were out, working the rooms as the last of the previous occupants were leaving, but the young girl at the desk could see their weariness and found them a clean room not occupied the night before. The gesture was appreciated. With the door closed and the heavy curtains darkening the room, they simply crawled into the bed and crashed out for the next six hours.

A couple of car doors slammed and the sounds of someone trundling a suit case past their room slowly brought Alex to wakefulness. The events and long drive of the past two days had blurred and still needed processing. He had an extended shower and found a kettle to fill and bring to the boil. Sachets of instant coffee were found on a wooden tray. The owners had thoughtfully left a carton of fresh milk in the tiny bar fridge. Tessa was awake and watching, so unbidden he poured a second cup.

Tessa was the first to speak. "That was something. Let's not do it again."

"Indeed." He carried her beverage to the bedside and while sipping his own cracked the blackout curtains a little, allowing a solid amount of light to fill the room. It was an old hotel, probably in need of a

facelift, but spacious and clean enough. Apart from the queen sized bed, there was a low couch and a coffee table opposite a generously sized flat screen TV.

"I'll find something for us to eat while you get up, then we'll try to work out what we have here."

Tessa, still prone, rubbed her eyes and nodded in agreement. Alex found where he'd kicked off his shoes and made for the door.

As it turned out, there was a bakery nearby with some passable salad rolls on offer. They made a meal of that on the small motel room table. After clearing away the debris, they spread out their accumulated information, including the red journal.

Again Tessa exercised her professional skills to summarise complex events and made rapid notations on a legal pad.

"I'm sticking with facts only here. Big picture. Years ago, Ben Caslow came into a lot of money, set up investments and bequests and promptly died. Not much happened until our law firm settled the estate with your help.

Ben said that he'd won the money in a lottery, which appears to be false. His final job was to build a weird staircase in the desert for the Australian and British Air Force, which apparently is still some kind of State secret. We found his plans, found his staircase. Found a new name on the staircase. Angela. And now we have a diary. Okay so far?"

"Check. There are huge gaps, but that sums it up."

Alex tabled the red notebook and turned to the first page. "The first entry is about six months before he died." He squinted closely at the handwriting. "He writes small and janky. I tried to read a bit of it in the car, but it was too difficult."

"Okay. He got the tower job in Adelaide... Met some military types. Wow! They accepted his two point two million dollar quotation. They told him not to keep any journals, so he immediately started one. He met some sergeant that he says is an asshole."

The entries were brief and Alex turned more pages as he spoke. "Here we go again. He met an Air Force girl called Angela. More about Angela... More about Angela... She gave him some wine from a family vineyard. Hey. Is that what we found in the ute?"

"Mmm. Probably. Go on."

"He really likes this Angela woman. Randy bugger, but I guess we already knew that. He made friends with some kind of technical guy called Nolan."

"Technical guy? Would that make him a scientist or technician?"

"Unclear. He calls him a radio nerd with a squeaky voice, who's in charge of making the electric pulse tower. That's the one we saw next to the wooden tower."

"Then he goes on a lot more about some nasty Staff Sergeant called Lipton that he was trying to stich up."

Alex was silent for a moment then giggled out loud.

"Well spit it out!" Tessa was impatient.

"If nothing else, Ben Caslow had a sense of humour. He kept catching small lizards and put them in this guy's boots each morning. The guy gets really angry, but can't catch Ben doing it. There are some long breaks here. Alright. The project is almost done. His friend Nolan is unhappy about some unnamed dangerous procedure. Ben doesn't understand it, but his friend is shitty and scared about something. Ben says he doesn't care, because his job is nearly done and it's not his problem.

Ben wants to go to Angela's vineyard and meet her family. Wow. He wants to marry her. He'd received word that she was coming to the test site the following day. He wants to take her up the top of his tower and propose."

He turned another page. "That's it. No more entries. That's really weird."

Angela sighed. "This is really valuable information. It's justified our trip, but there are still unanswered questions. Did Ben get to propose to this woman? Where is she now?"

"We have a figure of 2.2 million that Ben was going to get for this job. That explains some of his windfall."

"Mmm. Yes, but the amount actually invested through my law firm was closer to seven million. That's a pretty big gap to fill."

Alex tapped the cover of the closed notebook with one finger. "I'm going to have to find this Angela woman. It tells us she was in the Air Force, which is pretty vague. We don't have a family name for her. All this happened about 17 years ago, that's a damned cold trail."

Tessa didn't answer, but picked up her phone, powered it up and began flicking through images. He waited silently, as she was obviously pursuing a train of thought. Then she stopped scrolling and held the device out for Alex to see.

"I took a picture of that bottle of shiraz that was boxed up in Ben's ute. I didn't recognise the branding."

Alex nodded. "Wiragallup Wines. Hahndorf, South Australia. The bottle is still wrapped up in the back of our car. If the wine really did come from the family of this Angela woman, she could still be there, or someone could identify her."

"Hahndorf, that's only about four hours drive away. We could visit them tomorrow." She picked up the red book and flicked through the pages.

"Different topic. This guy Nolan he speaks of, he appears to have been a friend on the inside. If anyone knew about Ben's state of mind in those final days, it'd probably be him. What have we got on him?"

"He isn't mentioned by full name, just Nolan. It says he had a squeaky voice, and that he's an engineer or scientist working for the military. That's pretty vague. He could be anywhere in the world by now, or dead. The Air Force aren't going to answer questions about one of their spook technicians doing classified work. All we'd do is show that we already know more than we should about the project."

"That's what I don't get. It all sounds like secrecy for secrecy's sake. So what if the world knows they were doing tests in the desert. Who really gives a shit? It was 17 years ago."

Alex shrugged. "Just because we don't understand the reasons, doesn't mean that there aren't any. The way the diary cuts off suddenly makes me think that something bad happened. Bad enough for Ben to take off and leave this book behind." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. A reminder that he really ought to have a shave. "Y'know if this Nolan bloke really was an important scientist or technician, he probably did other work outside the Air Force, either before or after this secret gig. He could have published papers, or had been part of a civilian project. Chances are that something'll show up in a search engine. Let's dig."

They worked their respective screens for a few minutes using key words like 'Nolan', 'Nuclear EMP and Research. There was plenty of content to sift through. It went nowhere. After most of an hour, they stopped for coffee, talked about anything else and went back to the task at hand.

Tessa was the first to get a hit. "Found something. I picked up a British government pdf report from ten years ago. The title is '*The effects upon civilian infrastructure of a contemporary Carrington Event*'. There are four names as authors of the paper. One of these was George Nolan Elliot. There seems to be a lot of notes about power lines blowing up." She looked up from her reading. "What the fuck is a Carrington Event?"

"I know this one. A long time ago, maybe the 1850's or 60's the sun put out a big-ass solar flare. They call them 'mass ejections' or something like that. Anyway this one burst in front of Earth's orbit. There wasn't any electronics back then, but there were lots of telegraph wires and power lines. It burned out lights, generators and trashed a lot of the telegraph network. We're probably overdue for another one. There's been plenty of speculation about what would happen to all of our modern electronics when it happens again. Anyone who'd done research on nuclear radio bursts ought to be full-bottle on these natural events. I think you've found our man."

"I'm going to message the office and get one of the juniors to try and track this guy down. They're going to make more progress than we can from here."

Chapter 18

From Port Augusta, through Adelaide, it was an easy run to Hahndorf. The day was clear and for the past hour they had been seeing more and more long fields of grape vines. All the big brands were represented. Settled by Lutheran immigrants nearly two hundred years ago, the German names and architecture still exerted a big influence. The Wiragallup Estate was easy to find. It had a long, broad driveway. Narrow forage wagons were busy working between the rows of vines, slowly discharging mulch at the base of each vine line. The driveway terminated in a wide, but mostly empty car park. Signs pointed towards a row of red brick buildings for 'wine tasting'.

Alex carried a plastic shopping bag. Together they entered through broad doors of ancient timbers. It revealed a refurbished tourist space where tall stools surrounded secondhand barrels being used as tables. Big money had been spent here. Old farm implements were suspended from the high roof on wires. A long counter fronted rows of bottles on shelves. The place had a timeless musty smell that risked inebriation of guests through the simple act of breathing. Their entry had broken a beam and triggered a chime. A middle-aged attendant on the far side of the counter began to move in their direction. He sported a full head of hair with greying streaks, but was lean cleanly shaven and moved easily. His routine was a practised one. On a dark shirt, a metal badge with the vineyard logo presented the name 'Brian'.

"Hi. How's your day?" He produced a pair of balloon glasses from under the counter and parked them in front of the couple. His best smile was on display. "Are you looking for any particular flavour today?"

Alex was forthright "I'm interested in a Shiraz."

A bottle with a shiny black label materialised on the counter and two fingers were poured into each glass. Tessa, ever a fan of a fine red, gave her glass a light pull and nodded appreciatively. Alex didn't touch his glass. Instead he withdrew the wooden box from his bag and extracted the Shiraz from Ben's ute. "What can you tell me about this drop?"

The man's face went from smiles to blank, then stern. "Where did you get that? That's from private stock – and it's extinct. You have no business having that in your possession."

In the background the chatter of other visitors entering the building interrupted the conversation. Alex deftly returned the bottle to the box. "Is there somewhere where we can talk?"

Without taking his eyes off the two visitors, the man tapped on a sliding glass pane behind the counter. "Frank... Can you come out here and serve for a bit? You two, come with me." He led them into a side room where four low back double-seats in black leather surrounded a low table. Awards in frames adorned the walls. This was evidently where the serious tastings took place.

Once seated, the host was terse. "Who are you and where did you get that bottle?"

"I'm Alex Kingbridge, this is my wife Tessa. My father was Ben Caslow. He passed away about seventeen years ago, but we recently found that bottle in his car, still in storage."

That elicited no recognition or response, so Alex continued. "We located a journal he wrote. It said that he had been spending time with a woman who had given him two bottles. It seems that their relationship was a serious one. We lost track of them and we're

following this bottle. The woman was in the Air Force. Her name was Angela."

This time the response was immediate, he took in a deep breath while his face passed through different levels of anguish. Alex and Tessa looked at each other and waited.

He spoke quietly. "She was my sister. She died seventeen years ago."

Alex withdrew the red journal from his bag and turned to the final page. "It says here that my father was hoping to visit your vineyard and that he was going to propose marriage to Angela, then it stopped. I don't know what happened next."

"Angela was a career Air Force girl. That's all she ever wanted to be. She was smart. Sharp as they come and super fit. Never smoked. Too ambitious to stay on the family farm. One day she shows up here as a complete mess. She looked thirty years older and struggled to walk. We all wanted to know what had happened to her, but she wouldn't say. Her hair started falling out in clumps. She gave my parents a bank cheque for five million dollars. No explanation, except that she'd earned it honestly. She died a week later. Organ failure they said. She received a posthumous promotion and a full military funeral. There was a complete block about what she'd been doing and what had happened to her. My mother died five years ago and my father a year after that. They never knew what had happened to their daughter." The memory was obviously traumatic for him.

"I'm sorry." Was all Alex could squeeze out. But there were gaps still to be filled. "Please, what was her second name?"

"Angela was originally a Schmidt. It's the family name for the farm. We go back to the first settlers in this area from Prussia in the 1830's. Hahn as in Hahandorf was the name of the ship's captain that brought them here. Before she entered the Air Force as a cadet, Angela changed her surname to Parkes. My mother's maiden name."

"We don't know what happened to your sister, but my father died at about the same time. I'm beginning to suspect whatever killed Angela, killed both of them."

"That bottle was from a private stock. Experimental, just for our family. Only a few hundred bottles ever made. The best stock from a poor yield drought year. I thought that they'd all gone a long time ago. The last one was opened at my mother's funeral. I'm sorry, but seeing the bottle from your bag was a shock." He waved an arm expansively around the room. With the money she gave us, my father built all this. The sales and tasting building here was built in Angela's honour."

Tessa jumped in at this point. "I do have one question. The journal we have speaks of a friend of Alex's father. Someone called Nolan. Does that name mean anything to you?"

He shook his head. "No. Sorry. It's not that I'm struggling to remember old details, it's just that Angela would never talk about her work, where she'd been or who she'd met. She was in the military. We didn't ask and she didn't volunteer anything. That was a mistake. We should have asked more questions. I've always regretted that."

Alex stood up and offered his hand. "Thanks for being so candid with us Brian. I'm not sure how much this has helped us, but I think it has. I don't have anything of substance to tell you at this stage, but if we can find out what happened to my father, it could tell us more about what happened to Angela."

He nodded, gave a grim smile, but stayed seated. The encounter had dredged up traumatic memories that affected him to this day.

They made their way back to the car. Once safely out of earshot, Tessa revealed her thoughts. "I noticed that you didn't say anything about the TOWER project that Ben and Angela had been working on."

"No. It's too soon. We don't have enough facts to share yet, just more parts of the puzzle. There are three big pieces of the jigsaw here. Angela died around the same time as Ben. It sounded an awful lot like some kind of radiation poisoning. Whatever killed her could have been the same thing that killed Ben." They reached the car and he suspended his thoughts until they were both seated. He started the engine. The second point. She gave her parents five million dollars, and then died. That doesn't sound like it was stolen money, but the figure is too much of a coincidence. Ben earned about two million dollars for the construction job, but presented seven million to

your law firm for investment and bequests. The mysterious difference is exactly five million dollars.

They drove in silence for a while. Tessa asked the unanswered question. "What's the third thing?"

"Something bad happened to Ben and to this Angela. They had freedom of movement. They could have told the world about what had happened to them, but they both stayed quiet until the very end. That only makes sense if someone paid them to keep quiet. Paid them a lot!"

"So where to next?"

"We've got to find this Nolan bloke. If he's still alive, he'll know what really happened. Whether he'll share it with us or not is another story."

Chapter19

Ben was uncharacteristically excited. He'd received word that Angela was coming to the project site. For months now the work had been hard and focused, with little time for introspection. There were quiet moments at night when his thoughts drifted to Angela. He missed her wry smile and friendly insolence. Being stuck in one of the most

remote places on the planet meant that at the end of a shift, he couldn't just pop out to visit Angela for a couple of hours. Communications from this site was secure, monitored and limited to essential traffic only. There was no prospect for that cordial banter he enjoyed so much.

As he had done on the first day, Ben enjoyed climbing up on his container platform that bordered his workspace. The container tops were now stained by the red dust that had settled there over recent months. He liked to visit this spot in a quiet moment and turn a full circle. Apart from the project towers rising from the claypan, there was little but stunted trees to the horizon, struggling to exist in the almost sterile red sands. They had no trunk, but branches grew from a fixed point on the ground. When they were old enough, they would blacken and fall to the ground, making space for new branches to rise. Each tree formed a rough circle that could have been centuries in the making. Once he'd picked up a stick no thicker than his finger and tried to break it over a knee. It may as well have been an iron bar for the yield it provided.

The sense of remoteness was total. It seemed as though he was at sea and the camp was an island. The only highway for hundreds of kilometres was still a long drive to the south. It was a completely different kind of solitude to the cooler climate of his Bruny Island home. How natives would have survived and moved around this landscape in years gone by was a mystery to him. Ben decided that with the money he was going to make from this job, he'd give up the tools and focus instead upon making his Tasmanian property more comfortable. Perhaps he could persuade Angela to come and visit his place.

There had been fresh gossip. The word was that the head of the British military, an Admiral, had quietly come out from the UK. He was being joined by the Australian Defence minister and they were making a discrete visit to their secret venue. The high-level visit required someone with appropriate clearance and project familiarity to escort the brass around. From the Air Force perspective, Angela was the natural choice to bring them to and from the site. A transport aircraft with short take-off and landing had been booked and soon they were scheduled to arrive at the claypan .

Ben's work was essentially complete. Despite his initial reticence to become involved with such a coarse construction, he was quietly proud of his achievement. It totally lacked the finesse of his usual work, but he'd created a unique, perfectly proportioned spiral stair that climbed a dizzying six containers high. Not a single metal screw or nail was used in its assembly, invoking legacy techniques of timber joinery completely absent from modern construction.

The base had been tidied up in anticipation of the arrival. Blown-in weeds had littered the spaces between buildings and accumulated on the perimeter cyclone fence. These had all been gathered and ejected. The place looked good. Ben even donned his cleanest Hawaiian shirt for the occasion. He could hear the growl of a turboprop aircraft from some distance away, followed by the heterodyne beat as it taxied to a safe space well away from the two towers.

Ben left his container platform and nursed a coffee in the mess hall. That morning there had been a small task for Ben to complete solo while the officers were fully distracted. It was tricky, but he'd know soon enough if he'd achieved his objective. The compound remained quiet. It was evident that the brass had been taken straight to the tower site for an inspection. Chook in the kitchen had been notified

that they would arrive soon for refreshments. Word was that the group were to spend the night at the site and fly out mid-morning the following day after witnessing some preliminary tests.

A convoy of four vehicles pulled up outside the mess hall and a crowd of uniforms shuffled in. In the thick of this was Angela, looking very smart in her navy blues, shepherding the group around like a flight attendant. She made eye contact with Ben, smiled and winked, but maintained the banter with the guests on the adjacent row of tables. Once they were settled with coffee and cake, Angela spoke at elevated volume. "Now I'd like to introduce you to our special civilian contractor who made the non-metallic tower possible. Mister Ben Caslow." With a wave she implored that he join the main table.

Ben obliged. Hands were shaken all-round. Angela introduced Admiral Hartman from the UK and Minister Vane, his Australian counterpart. It was clear that they were enjoying something of a holiday atmosphere in this remote outback oasis. Surprisingly Sergeant Lipton was not among them. It wasn't like the man to miss the opportunity to brown-nose the establishment. Ben was confident he'd show up soon enough.

The Admiral was chatty and expansive with what he had seen at the site. His accent was quintessentially British. "I must say Mister Caslow that we were all impressed by your handiwork. Ms Parkes here has been giving us the details. It was a long way up that tower and it quite literally took our breath away. To think you achieved it metal free is quite the achievement." He took a long sip of the tea provided. "A sticking point early in this project was whether or not we could create the electrically transparent platform in time."

Ben smiled and nodded as was expected. "It was all in the preparation. Selecting the right wood to pin the larger parts with slots and wedges was a big part, but getting access to cast epoxy bolts also made the work go faster. For me, this has been an extremely coarse project. I'm more used to finer, more detailed work. My work here is done, although I have left a tool box up the top. I must retrieve it before the morning test." He turned to address Angela. "Ms Parkes, a word if I may."

She nodded and they briefly moved away from the table. He spoke softly, for her ears alone. "Can you meet me at the tower in about twenty minutes?" She quickly nodded and returned to her seat. Ben smiled and addressed the table once more. "Gentlemen, I have a task to complete. I shall leave you in peace." He shook several of their hands and departed from the mess hall.

Mere minutes passed and Sergeant Lipton burst into the room, red faced, indignant and careless of the company present. "Where is that hack carpenter?" The room fell silent. The officers found the intrusion bordering upon the offensive.

A uniformed aide ventured a simple answer. "Mister Caslow had some work to do at the test site"

"What appears to be the problem Sergeant?" Commodore Davis was terse.

"There's a large goanna in my quarters. It has soiled my bed and tried to attack me."

"Well, we are in the desert, perhaps it just wandered in there."

"It's wearing my best parade ground shirt."

This produced a barely suppressed snort of laughter from one of the officers, which only served to further infuriate Lipton. The military heads said nothing, but remained compressed-lipped as a means to control their mirth.

Somehow Commodore Davis retained his composure. "Sergeant we will address this issue later. Please leave us now. That is not a request."

An angry Lipton simply turned on his heels and fled the room.

The Commodore shook his head and addressed the table. "The man has issues."

Ben parked his car between two other vehicles at the base of the tower and waited. The site appeared pretty deserted, mostly because the technical team wanted to stay out of the way of the inspection. A short time later a trail of dust rose from the track to the compound. Angela had appropriated a vehicle and followed him to the site. This time there was no restraint. She rushed to Ben. They held each other tight and kissed with the passion of love reunited.

"We've been apart for much too long." The words sounded *Gone with the Wind* corny even as he spoke them, but the feelings were real."

"I feel the same, but I couldn't come here without a solid reason. Looking after this travelling circus was my first opportunity."

"I watched them closely." He grinned. "They hung on your every word. I'm sure they adore you."

"It was your work that took the prize. I described how you pieced the tower together and they were all in awe."

"I bet you didn't tell them about this..." Ben led her to the bottom step where a short board covered up a vertical portion of the first tread. With his fingers, he pried at the board until it came free, revealing the entirety of the riser. The name '*Angela*' had been artfully carved in the rough timber.

"I..." For the first time since they'd met, she appeared speechless.

"There's more. Come with me, up the tower. I know you were just up there, but I have something to show you."

Together they climbed the tower. Ben's fitness was evident, having been up and down hundreds of times in recent weeks. Angela was a little slower but still no slouch. Had they been paying more attention, they would have noticed the dust cloud of another approaching car.

Together, they stepped from the stairwell apex and onto the platform. The Canberra Bomber, bright with a fresh paint job, dominated the space. About ten metres away the adjacent steel tower with its complex of radials and waveguides pointed in their direction. Next to the staircase door was Ben's toolbox, strategically left behind. The sun was passed its zenith on another clear day, but a cool breeze at this height removed its sting. There was a slight wobble as the platform swayed between the full tension of the guy hawsers, but it was barely noticeable. Ben opened the toolbox and withdrew portable cassette player he'd borrowed from Nolan. Pressing play on Angela's cassette tape, the sounds of trumpets and the vocals of *"if all my dreams come true I'll be spending time with you.. "* filled the platform. Again from the toolbox he produced a smaller box which he handed to Angela.

She looked at it then at Ben with a grin that would have challenged a Cheshire cat. "Go on." He prompted.

Inside was a fine wooden ring, deep burgundy made from two complete spirals of hardwood, polished to perfection. "I made it from Australian Buloke. The world's hardest wood. Some of it grows around here...Will you marry me?" The music, although totally out of place on this elevated platform in the desert, was superbly appropriate.

The answer was immediate. "Yes!" again they embraced. The moment was perfect.

Another singing sound began. This one had a raspy buzz like electric drive of a Melbourne tram. Faintly at first, with the noise gradually rising in pitch and intensity. It was awful. The cassette player cut out. Together they turned and stared at the adjacent steel tower. Between the matrix of insulated radials a second mechanical noise emanated from the metal doors of a large box that also faced the platform. Panels of lead moved to the left and right. It revealed a cluster of honeycombed bricks that glowed blue, even in the full light of day. Incredulous, they just watched.

There was an insanely bright flash that was felt rather than seen and they both collapsed unconscious to the deck where they stood.

They were found an hour later, sunburned and unmoving.

Chapter 20

Ben's head was in a world of pain. In fact his whole body ached. After several failed attempts he opened his eyes by a fraction. There was too much light, but he continued to force them open. He was in a narrow bed, in a room that looked somewhat like a hospital room. After some moments of contemplation he drew the conclusion that he was actually in a hospital room. With additional effort he sat up and bunched a pillow behind him. There was a call button on a dangling wire. He pressed it. After what seemed to be another eternity an orderly entered the room.

"You're awake. You must be hungry."

He started to say that he wasn't hungry then hesitated and decided that yes he was actually hungry and simply nodded.

Some sandwiches duly arrived and he ate them but they tasted funny and didn't sit well.

A different person entered the room in blue uniform. It was Ames.

"Group Captain Morris Ames. My first visitor. Are you going to tell me where I am and what the fuck has happened to me?"

The man picked up a chair parked by the window and brought it closer to his bed.

"You're in Melbourne. You were sedated and transported here by air. You've been out of it for 48 hours. They've treated for sunburn and... other ailments. I've been sent to talk to you about your classified work. As for what happened, we've pieced things together."

"Well, get on with it then."

"You seem to have upset Staff Sergeant Lipton. You went to the tower with Angela Parkes. He followed you there and decided to seek some revenge. He thought you were on your own. Lipton entered the control room of the EMP tower. There is a large activation button under a plastic guard. He deliberately lifted the guard and pressed the button to launch an EMP cycle. This is all in his statement. He says that he intended to give you a headache. He also says he didn't realise that the EMP generator had also been hooked up to a radiation source that you were exposed to for a full minute. The intense EMP generator knocked you out and the radiation source gave you a radiation dose."

"What kind of radiation dose?"

He paused before answering. "The lethal kind."

"Crap." He sat higher in the bed. "Angela was with me. What about Angela?"

Ames was obviously distraught. "She got what you got. I'm sorry. Angela was taken to the hospital in Adelaide. Her sunburn was minimal. Yours was worse and you're now in the Alfred hospital in Melbourne. Angela has been discharged – for the time being. She's returned to her family in Hahndorf."

"Lethal you say. I don't feel great, but I don't feel too bad. Just a little hungover. Are you over-reacting here?"

Again he shook his head. "No. The exposure you both received was well defined. It's been regarded as a lethal dosage. You will feel poorly for a day or two, but mostly normal for perhaps a week. We've already administered painkillers and strong anti-inflammatory drugs,, but they won't help much. Your cell walls have already begun to break down and your health will fail rapidly."

"Nolan said that this radiation shit was no good, but you had to go ahead and do it anyway." Ben spoke with bitterness and with good cause.

"There's more I have been asked to tell you. This... incident is a very sensitive issue given the secrecy of the project. It's also embarrassing because high level government officials of both countries were at the site when it happened. They personally held both Angela and yourself in high regard and you were air-lifted out on their plane. Late yesterday there was a joint meeting in the Prime Minister's office. Compensation was discussed on the basis of non-disclosure of the incident."

"What good is compensation going to do me if I'm screwed anyway? What if I don't want to be quiet?"

"You can choose not to sign the NDA and be detained for security reasons. Or you can sign, take the money and it can be your choice what to do with it. Your remaining days would be your own."

"I have to ask. How much are we talking about?"

"The project budget was a large one. The senior officials want to be generous about this. Five million dollars. Each. Tax free."

"Sounds like they are trying to pay away the guilt."

Ames didn't answer. The silence was awkward.

"I have another question. This is important to me. What's happening to Lipton? A serious ass-kicking is in order."

Lipton has been detained, interviewed and charged. Nothing will happen for some weeks until your position is... finalised, but he's going to be expelled from the Force. Dishonourably. For a career guy

like him, that's the end of his working life. If he talks, he's facing years of prison time under national security law. You won't see him again."

Ben's bitterness was in plain view. "Bastard. He's destroyed Angela's life and he's destroyed mine. We were going to get... We were going to get..." The words wouldn't come. "Nevermind. It's too late now. Sacking is too good for him."

Ben frowned. "Another thing. I worked hard on that job and I was supposed to be paid out when it was finished. What's happening there?"

"That was negotiated at 2.2 million as I recall. As part of the settlement, the balance of that payment has been expedited and is already in your account.

"Woo, bloody Hoo! Party time. He sat upright and turned to dangle his legs from the bed. "Where's a pen and your damned form. Also, where the hell are my pants? I've got things to do. Come to think of it, where's the rest of my stuff?"

Your personal effects were loaded into your car and have already been transported from the project site. Tell me where you want it to be and it'll be delivered there."

"Hmm. There's an upholstery guy at Bayside where I sometimes park it up. Leave it with him."

Ames stood up. "One final thing Ben. I'm not feeling too good about all this either. You don't have much time left, but you have some. You'll not be able to spend your money on yourself in any meaningful way. I'm making a personal suggestion. Call it an opportunity. Think about who in your life you would like to see receive some benefit after you're gone."

"And how would I do that?"

Ames felt in his pocket for his wallet and extracted a business card. "Here's a law firm not far from here. Bloomfield & Close. I've used them personally. They're good. Probably they can help, but remember not a word about the project, or how you came into the money. If they ask..." He waved a hand in the air. "Tell them you won a lottery or something."

Chapter 21

Tessa cleared down the call and placed her phone on the table.

"That was a message from my office. They've been digging. Something they're usually good at, but they just called to say that they can't find anything about a George Elliot or a George Nolan Elliot. The man has disappeared. They're speculating that he's moved overseas, or died, or both."

The couple hadn't travelled far from the vineyard. They were tired and had taken a nice room for a couple of nights. It had a kitchen and a dining table. It was an easy walking distance from the town centre. Not knowing which way to jump next, it was as good as any place to be.

Alex was frustrated. "Damn. Without this guy the trail's gone cold again. What have they tried so far?"

She counted them off on fingers. "Social media, electoral rolls, phone books. Even some discrete driver's licence searches. Nothing."

"License... license... there's something nagging me that I'm missing. Grab that journal again and read back the part where he mentions Nolan."

Tessa picked up the red book and turned to a page highlighted with a yellow sticky note. *"I had another session with Nolan last night. At first I thought he was just another squeaky voiced radio nerd. A career boffin, but he's a nice guy, knows his stuff and laughs at my jokes. It's nice to have a beer with another soul as the sun goes down. We bounce ideas off each other."* She returned the book to the table. "Not much to go on with there."

"Here's what I'm thinking. He is not just any sort of nerd. Ben calls him a *Radio Nerd*. That's a very specific type of nerd. Remember Beanie at our wedding. He was with me when I went down the Franklin River. He carried a radio and did the Morse code thing. Among other skills, he's definitely a 'radio nerd'." Alex fumbled about for his phone, pulled up the contact list and dialled.

"Hey Beanie, it's Alex. Yeah I'm good. Mate, if I was looking for someone who calls themselves a radio nerd, how would I find them? No, I don't have a callsign for him. Okay. Okay."

Tessa watch from the far side of the table, only hearing one side of the conversation. Alex groped for a note pad and pen and began scrawling. "Really? Yep... Yep... I've got it. Thanks, I'll let you know." He ended the call and grinned.

"Well?"

"Who would have thought it? There's a special database for radio nerds. Anyone who plays with radio has a callsign issued by the

federal government and they keep a separate license database of the name address and callsign of all Australian operators."

"But wouldn't that be a secure list like a car license?"

"No. It's an anomaly. All transmitter stations must be listed. There's an open website search on the government database. Beanie gave me a link."

Alex used his laptop for this, as it was easier to read than his phone. "Here's the search engine." He typed in 'nolan' and it came back with 15 hits. There was a Nolan street in Melbourne. And Jenolan popped up a couple of times. None looked good. He tried George Nolan and George Elliot. No hits. He tried different spellings of Elliot. With two 'l's and two 't's. This produced 35 hits. Near the end of the list there was a GN Elliott. "Hey. I think that's our guy."

"How do you know? It could be a Graeme or Gerry Elliott."

Alex opened up the full client record. "This G N Elliott has a callsign of VK5EMP. That's the sort of callsign that would belong to a guy who made Electro-magnetic Pulses for a living. 12 Malcolm Street, Port Victoria, South Australia. I've heard of this place. It's a coastal town on the Yorke Peninsula, a long way south of Adelaide." He was jubilant. "Game on!"

They had an early night, because it was still a good three hour drive down the peninsula. They discussed the possibility of trying to call the man first, but in the absence of a phone number, simply showing up on his doorstep was the only viable option. Not knowing what sort of reception they were going to get, or even if the man was at home, were risks they would have to accept.

Yorke Peninsula has a dry landscape, but was sufficiently south for it to be viable farmland. Port Victoria had a long history by Australian standards. Its sheltered waters made it an ideal site for wheat and barley exports. A long jetty was built in the 1870's and clipper ships would be loaded up for fast transit of grain to England via the treacherous Cape Horn. As Alex and Tessa drove through the town it was evident that many of the early settler's houses and government buildings had been preserved and were still in use.

Alex suggested an approach. "This may go nowhere if this fellow doesn't want to talk about the secret project work. We'd do well to drop the main facts, but imply that we know more than we really do, then maybe he'll fill in the gaps without noticing it."

"That could work, but don't guess too much about what you don't know. Stick to the truth or it could backfire."

Malcolm Street was easy to find and Nolan's house was even easier. A brick veneer home with whitewashed walls and silver corrugated iron roof was not its most prominent feature. Two short windmill towers behind the house supported parabolic dish antennas of various sizes, with the black mesh rim of an even larger dish had its high point poking up just above roof height.

They pulled up opposite this and just looked at the place in mild awe.

Tessa broke the silence. "So this is the home of a radio nerd."

"Well if it isn't, then I don't know what one would look like."

Together they opened the low front gate and followed a weed ridden path to the front door. It had a cast-iron knocker in the form of a ring held in the teeth of a rat-faced creature. Alex gave a couple of loud clacks, which should have echoed through the home. There was a pause, then a thump and several more footsteps, felt more than heard. Always the telltale approach of a heavy-footed person on a timber floor.

The door opened and an elderly man with thick stubble and a jumble of grey-black hair that resemble a birds nest of steelwool looked back at them in consternation. "If this is about trying to sell me solar panels again, then I'm just not interested. The inverters are all too noisy" He looked like he wanted to close the door in their face.

Alex thought that Ben was right. This guy did have a squeaky voice. "Mister Elliott, I want to talk to you about someone you knew. Ben Caslow.

The man hesitated, said nothing for a few moments, then; "Go on, I'm listening."

I'm Alex Kingbridge. This is my wife Tessa. Ben Caslow was my father. I believe that you knew him."

"Mmm... I didn't think that Ben had any kids. Alright. Come in. Do you fancy a cuppa?"

They were led down a wide central hallway with odd piles of equipment and sections of waveguide piled high along one wall. The hall terminated in a large rectangular room with an immensely high ceiling rich in pressed metal embellishments, but yellowed with age. It was a kitchen and dining space combined. Central to this was a 1960's style chrome and green laminate table, mostly clear and accompanied by three chairs. Nolan gestured to the chairs and busied himself with a kettle. Mugs taken from a drying rack were placed before the guests. Tessa examined hers critically and when Nolan's back was turned, extracted a tissue and treated the rim of the mug to a quick wipe down.

Alex wanted to establish a modicum of trust with this stranger. "I'm sorry for showing up unannounced, but I had no contact number for

you. I must admit that you were difficult to find. We used a callsign search tool."

"It's true that I like to keep a low profile, but Ben with kids? I would not have guessed that." He deposited a tea bag in each mug and added hot water. An opened carton of milk was placed next to the sugar bowl. It was implicit that if they wanted additives, that they'd have to sort it out for themselves. "So, you must have had reasons for finding me. What's happening?"

"I never met Ben. I don't think that he knew I existed, but that's another story. I've been following his past life. It affected many people. It stopped suddenly about 17 years ago. We're hoping that you can fill in a few gaps."

The man sighed dejectedly and took a long, slow sip of his brew. "Yes, I knew Ben, but there's little I can talk about. I was in the RAAF when I met your father, doing...research. When my contract was up 15 years ago, I quit. I've been doing my own thing since then. I like it down here. My work back then was covered under the official secrets act. Even now, I can't say very much."

Tessa waded in. "If we tell you what we already know, then you won't have to cross any lines you don't want to."

"Sound's fair. Carry on."

"We found plans of the tower project he was working on. He built a non-metallic structure for testing radiation effects and we know that all this happened in the desert north of Ooldea. We know he knew you. We know he knew Angela Parkes and that he wanted to marry her. We know that they...died." Alex added: "I should point out, we're not interested in the technical details of the tests you made."

"How the hell did you find out so much? That project was insanely classified."

Alex felt it was time to play their next card. "We went there. Recently. We climbed his wooden tower. We saw *your* tower. He shouldn't have, but Ben kept a journal and we found it stashed in his quarters."

Nolan was stunned. "You *went* there? The site was at the ass-end of the world and it doesn't exist on maps. Still, I'm also surprised you found anything useful. They did regular searches for any unauthorised documents and notes. When the project finished, the place was completely stripped."

"Was it worth it? Did they get what they wanted in the end?" Tessa was finding this hard .

"Yes, I suppose so. I mean after Ben and Angela were flown out. They completed the program. It only took another month. We gathered lots of data, but I don't know how that data was used or if they did anything differently because of it. I still can't share that with you anyway. You wouldn't have another source to quote and

technically I'm still bound by the Act. At the end they talked about pulling it all down, but decided to keep it, *just in case*, or so they said. At least the Brits were keen to keep it."

Alex wanted to keep the momentum going. "Ben mentioned you. He said you were a friend and you'd talk regularly. But then the journal stopped. We know Angela died because we talked to her brother, but she never revealed to the family how she became ill. When Ben died, he had no family on hand and told his solicitors that he'd contracted a cancer. I believe that these deaths were nasty. Two similar fatalities at the same time sounds to me like some kind of poison or radiation exposure. What went wrong? Can you fill in some of the gaps? Please understand, we wouldn't quote you as the source."

He sighed. "You're taking me back to a dark time. One I've tried hard to forget. It's the main reason why I left the Force." He took another long pull at his tea. "Ben made a hobby of annoying an officer. Thinking back, it was juvenile, but for most part the guy had it coming."

Tessa added. "That would be Sergeant Lipton. Lizards hidden in the boots and so forth."

This produced a laugh. "Yes, it was all pretty funny at the time because the man was such an asshole. One day when the project was nearly done we spotted a decent sized goanna going past the fence. Ben asked me to help him catch it. We threw a blanket over it and slowly bundled it up with string so it couldn't bite or scratch. Ben said he had a plan. A finale before he was to leave, but wouldn't tell me any detail, saying that it would be better if I didn't know, but I found out anyway. Well, just before the tests began, he went into

Lipton's room, managed to put the lizard into his dress uniform, buttoning it tight around the neck, legs through the front sleeves, then he removed the ropes and let it run freely around his room."

It worked too well. Lipton went nuts. I learned later that he waited for Ben to head out to the tower, then followed him. Once Ben was at the top, Lipton triggered the EMP device. He claimed he didn't know about the radiation source that was linked to the EMP blast and was unaware that Angela was with Ben at that time. Ben had told me that when she came out that he was going to propose to her. He'd been talking about it for days. I went looking for them and was going to join in with a celebration. Instead I found them unconscious. Boy did shit hit the fan. They were airlifted out on the same plane that brought the top brass. That's when the damage control orders kicked in. I was ordered to remain at the test site and keep working. I collected a few of Ben's tools and things into his car and they had an airman drive it off-site. I never saw them again. Later I learned that they only survived for a few weeks and that they were given some kind of cash compensation conditional on them maintaining secrecy. A federal election wasn't far off and it would have been an embarrassing disaster for the ruling party if the story had leaked."

Alex and Tessa wordlessly looked at each other. It fitted. It was the tragic story they both did and did not want to hear, but it answered their most pressing questions.

Nolan was obviously stressed by reliving those final days. "It was bloody awful. I warned the Command that they were going too far with the ionising radiation source. It was not part of the original project."

He paused for a bit and played with his mug. The visitors remained silent, prompting the man to continue.

"After it all went down I really wanted to tell the world. Sure that fool Lipton pulled the trigger, but the blame went beyond him. They were playing with lethal forces. Had I tried to leak the story, I'd just finish up in a prison somewhere – or quietly disappear altogether. For years I couldn't think of a way to tell this story without screwing up my own life."

He looked up at his two guests. "If you have collected enough facts and can blow the whistle on this without mentioning me, then I'd really like to see that happen. Angela's family ought to know the truth. They should always have known.

He leaned over the table and grasped Alex's forearm in earnest. "You say you're Ben's son. You deserve some closure too."

Tessa felt that it was time to wade in with her legal perspective. "What you have told us this morning reinforces our trail of evidence. We could lift the lid on this and keep you out of it. It comes down to you Alex. If you want to expose this then we can do this. If you want to let the past go, then that's okay too."

"One more thing." Tessa withdrew a cassette tape from her pocket and placed it on the coffee table where the title 'Spiral Starecase' was

in plain view. "What about this? We found it in Ben's car, but it's blank. Do you know what it means?"

Nolan picked it up and held it between fingers of both hands. "That bloody tape. Angela gave it to Ben. It was their song. I heard it too many times. It was with them up on the platform when they were blasted. The EMP erased it and destroyed the player it was in. Look up the song '*More Today than Yesterday* and it'll make sense. Spiral Starecase, with the odd spelling, was the name of the band." With a surge of emotion, he placed it on the table and wiped an eye with the back of his hand. His voice was harsh. "I thought I was over it, but seeing that tape, just brings it all back."

Alex suspected it would come down to Nolan making a choice. If Ben had never been compensated, then he would never have known about his father and he and Tessa would never have met. In fact many people that they had brought together would never have met. As tragic as this event was, a lot of good had come from it.

"If it were just me, I'd probably let it go, but I'm thinking that I owe it to Ben, Angela and a whole lot of others that we tell this story." He smiled at Nolan. Thanks for filling a few gaps. We'll leave you now. Maybe after the story breaks we'll meet again, but for now... we were never here and this conversation never happened."

Nolan arose and shook Alex's hand. "When I woke up this morning, I figured it was going to be just another quiet day, but this is good. That project was supposed to be a high point in my career. With the accident I lost a friend and I've had to live with the knowledge that

the machine I built made it possible. Never being able to talk about it just made things worse. If you have a way to share their story, well, it'll certainly make *me* feel better. Thank you."

Chapter 22

Ben sat in the heavily padded visitors chair at *Bloomfield and Close* and fidgeted. He had a foul headache, which made it difficult to concentrate. He'd been provided with a cocktail of strong pain killers that were keeping him going, but made his head buzz. They were quick to point out that under normal circumstances, this level of dosage would be horribly addictive, but in his case...not so much. Still, his hair was a mess. What little remained was now white and came away in small clumps whenever he ran his fingers through it.

The room was too hot and Ben was sweating. On the far side of the desk an elderly solicitor was talking, trying to ignore the state of his unruly client. Ben had already forgotten his name, even though they'd just been introduced.

"So Mister Caslow, this is a significant amount you have provided for us to invest and bequest. We do require strict instructions as to who the beneficiaries are, but so far you have only provided this letter with a list of town names where you once worked. Even though you've signed the investment forms, we'll need more information."

Ben pulled a sheet of notepaper from his pocket, flattened it between both hands on the desk and passed it across to the man. "I...I wrote this downstairs a short time ago.

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

Ben put one hand to his forehead and wiped away the beaded perspiration. He felt somewhat dizzy. The specialist had said that this would happen and that he would need to increase pain killers to compensate. He'd already moved his car back to John's factory, no longer trusting himself to drive. "Sorry mate, I'm not having a good day. I want to get back to my hotel for a bit of a break. I'll come back in the morning and I'll give you more detail." Without waiting for acknowledgement, Ben stood and left the office. The pain was certainly getting worse. Partway across the office foyer, he experienced a pain-flash of renewed intensity. He wanted to something to hold onto for just a moment, but nothing was within reach. Just then, conscious thought left him and he fell to the floor. The dour receptionist witnessed this from where she sat, but it didn't help. Instead she dialled an emergency hotline. By the time the ambulance arrived, Ben had already stopped breathing.

Fifteen minutes later, a paramedic lowered his stethoscope and began writing in a notepad. He stood, returned the pad to a shoulder pocket and went to the ambulance double-parked in Collins street to fetch a trolley and a long bag. Sadly, there was nothing he could do for this man.

Chapter 23

Three weeks after their Nolan encounter, Alex and Tessa found themselves in Hobart on a couch in the office of journalist Jamie Litchfield. The man had been at their wedding reception and was

surprised to hear from them again so soon. After their return from South Australia they met and tabled the story of how a secret British-Australian military project had gone wrong and killed two of its team members. The subsequent cover up had been very effective, until now.

Their decision to go public was not taken lightly. They discussed possible outcomes during the long drive back from Port Victoria. Do they simply accept what happened and just let it rest, or do they tell the world? Alex admitted to feelings of conflict, but the encounter with Angela's brother and Nolan revealed still unresolved stresses arising from that event. The deciding factor was not just about Ben and his legacy. Alex felt increased outrage that two governments had colluded to conduct experiments in secret, without oversight from the people whom they were supposed to represent. If they can't conduct their work without approval or at least awareness by the public, then perhaps they shouldn't be doing such things. This culture of concealment stirred his long standing resentment against politicians behaving badly.

Alex had provided all the material evidence he'd been able to gather, including the hand drawn sketches of the staircase his father had left behind at the Bruny Island farm. The recent photos and video clips of the abandoned tower site and the red covered journal written by Ben. These were not original military documents and not subject to Secrets Act protections, but together they painted a complete sequence of events.

Very quickly Jamie could see that this story was going to be a bombshell. While details were scarce, he had been able to corroborate some elements of discovery through other sources. The

air force had certainly built something big in the desert and had faked a derailment to cover up its construction. After three weeks of careful preparation, Jamie was ready to go public with this account. Alex and Tessa had returned for its launch.

Jamie's office was large, but if he had a stash of sensitive documents, they were safely stored elsewhere. The room was clean except for the chairs, desk, some wall mounted certificates and photographs of previous acts of journalism. Behind the desk was a tall bookcase with an eclectic selection of books. Central to this was the glass spire of the Walkley Award for his previous expose on the Tasmanian politician who had concealed the murder of his wife.

The phone on his desk rang. Jamie made some brief comments to the caller and returned the phone to its cradle. "That was from the publishers. They confirm that the story is breaking today, both in print and on the newspaper website. Shit will be hitting the fan quite soon. You'll have to make yourself scarce before the government starts putting me under the microscope."

Tessa was aware of the fine line Jamie would be taking in exposing what was ostensibly a classified project. There have been prior instances of raids being carried out at the offices of journalists. Even the national broadcaster had taken the precaution of setting up off-shore whistleblower websites to protect their sources from national security raids. Tessa was forthright. "We were very careful to keep us out of the picture, which is why I was keen that we only met in person. You can say you're protecting your anonymous sources, but that won't stop them from checking to see who you've been talking to. They'll be looking for someone to blame for the leaks."

"That's part of my job. I'll deal with it." He picked up the phone handset again and dragged it a bit closer. Time has shifted events to our advantage. The government in power back in Ben's time is not currently running the show. The politicians who were responsible are no longer active. I'm sure the current leaders will be quick to point this out when the story breaks. This brings us to the final step. I call the RAAF and ask them for a comment. We deliberately waited until publication was in progress so that they have no time to file any injunctions or suppression orders. I'll call them on hands-free so you can listen in, but don't say anything."

Jamie dialled the same Department of Defence number that Tessa had used from the public phone. He identified himself and the newspaper he represented. "I'd like to talk to a representative about one of your projects called 'Tower.'"

"Project tower? I'm sorry we have no reference to any such project. I'm putting you through to a Duty Officer."

There was a pause, then "Hello." The person did not identify themselves.

I'm calling about one of your desert projects called 'Tower'

There was a hesitation. Then "I'm listening."

"I'm calling to let you know that a story is currently being published about EMP testing in the outback 17 years ago, which like the nuclear tests at Maralinga, was a joint venture with the British government." Tessa nodded vigorously to indicate that yes, this was the same voice she had encountered previously from the public phone. The man did not respond, so Jamie continued. "Were you aware of the deaths of two team members through radiation poisoning at that time?"

The man was very coy. "I don't know where you got your information from, but you could get into a lot of trouble publishing anything about this. You would do better to send all your source data to us and we can look it over first."

"No, we won't be doing that. The story is going live as we speak. Would you like to comment about it?"

There was more hesitation, but the sound of breathing could still be heard. Then the call reverted to busy tone as the man hung up on them. Jamie was nonplussed. "I guess that would be a 'no' then." He pushed the phone aside. "Right. You two need to leave. Things are going to heat up soon."

Alex nodded. "Yes, but there's one more task to be done." He gestured at a carry bag at Tessa's feet. From this, she produced an MP3 player, three glasses and a single bottle of wine. With the deftness that comes from experience, Tessa applied a corkscrew and

withdrew the stopper. A generous serving was deposited in each glass.

Alex grasped the closest vessel and looked at the others in turn. Some formality was in order. "It's been both figuratively and literally a very long road that has brought us here."

"Ben and his would-be bride had their futures shortened horribly. It was a tragedy that should never have happened, but it set in motion a chain of actions that had an immense impact on the lives of so many others.

I can't think of a better way to celebrate this moment than by sharing this very rare, very exclusive vintage from the Hahndorf region. Like Ben, it is the last of its kind."

He held the glass high. Tessa and Jamie followed suit. "To Ben Caslow and Angela Parkes. Today we ensure that how they lived – and died won't be forgotten."

Glasses clinked. Angela pressed play on the MP3 device and quietly, they listened to the song. *More Today than Yesterday*.