

Infest

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Prologue

The cold, hard metal of the gun barrel rasped against her teeth as it was forced into her mouth. The trigger guard smashed into her bottom lip, splitting it open. The combined taste of blood, metal, and oil made her gag. She tried to draw in air through her broken nose to slow her breathing and calm her mind; to regain dominion over her thoughts, and fight the panic threatening to overwhelm her.

She refused to give up hope. She had few options. Her left arm was handcuffed to the bed. Her bandaged right arm was almost useless due to the injury he had inflicted earlier. She vowed to herself that she would persist in her struggle for survival. Fight until she had exhausted the last reserves of her strength. She would not be a passive victim and continue to suffer this violation.

The man holding the gun had tried to kill her once already. She had suffered at the hands of men many times. She was not surprised that he held a position of authority. Men like him were drawn to power. She despised him with all her being. She allowed the anger to build inside her, to fill her. She knew she would need to harness her rage and turn it against her attacker. She tried to pull her head away from the gun. His grip on her hair tightened, threatening to rip it from her scalp and forcing her back.

To escape alive, she needed a chance—an opening, however small. Her life had always been a struggle against the odds; a life punctuated by violence. She had learned to endure and harness her desire to live. She was determined to survive and to make him suffer.

Chapter 1

Marci didn't notice the sweat beading on her forehead. She was oblivious to the ache in her calves and the pain in her feet. She was lost, absorbed in her actions, existing in the moment. She ducked down low and thrust forward in quick, deliberate movements. Turning to the side and twisting her whole body, she pivoted on the soles of her feet before kicking a leg up towards the heavens. Her foot slammed back down onto the street, and she stopped, panting for breath. She was pulled back into the moment by the sound of clapping and hollering from her companions. She turned to them and gave a small bow in acknowledgement of their appreciation.

Dancing was Marci's passion; it was one of the few times the thoughts that plagued her waking hours were quiet, when she felt alive and free. On the rare evenings she wasn't working, she spent the night dancing in clubs until closing time.

It was past midnight, which made it Christmas Eve, and Marci still had a long night of work ahead of her. She unfolded her compact mirror, checked her makeup, wiped away the sweat from her brow, and applied some powder. Her pale skin was a rare sight in Sydney during the summer. She worked nights and preferred to spend the daylight hours in bed, stepping out into the sun only when necessary. If she tanned, it was harder to hide her scars. Her hair had natural curls, but tonight she had straightened it. Dark as a moonless night, it flowed halfway down her back in a smooth, unbroken line. She spent hours styling her hair and applying makeup before venturing out. She never considered the time wasted. Her looks were her trade.

When she was young, her father would shave off her hair whenever she got head lice—which was often—saying the treatment was too expensive. Her mother remained indifferent to her plight. Marci never gave in to the clippers without a fight, but he always won. She had endured this and much worse until she could take it no longer.

Life on the streets was a challenge but her life was her own, or so she felt. Freedom came with a price. The cost was difficult to meet when you had no fixed address. But there were ways to make money, good money—for money has no morality. Her clients had liked her boyish looks, but she grew her hair long anyway. When she was old enough, and had saved enough, she had lip fillers and breast augmentation, emphasising her feminine attributes. Rebuilding herself until the person looking back at her in the mirror reflected the person she was inside.

She had expected her profession to be tough and tiring; that the daily toil would take its toll. She had not anticipated the tedium. The hours dragged on in a repetitive cycle: watch, wait, work, repeat. Work was accompanied by a bouquet of perfume that did little to mask the underlying smell of smoke, sweat, and sex. It seeped into the

fabric of her tight-fitting clothes, manufactured from cheap, man-made fibres in far-off foreign lands. Assembled by the tiny, calloused hands of children. The seams were shiny with sweat from frantic fingers, desperate to reach the flesh within. Removed and redressed in haste, the clothes were a sponge for bodily fluids. Cleaned with cheap, powdered detergent purchased at the laundrette. She kept a coin purse to fill the hungry slots of the washing machines that couldn't erase the stains, only freshen and fade the fabric so that it could be worn once again.

Her feet and calves ached from being on her feet for so long in her new, impractical, thigh-length boots with towering heels. She spent most nights standing in filth-strewn laneways and at intersections or taking shelter beneath bridges when the rain fell. Summer storms hit hard and fast in Sydney, with rain so violent that it bounced when it hit the street. Raging torrents of runoff swirled down the roads, sweeping detritus into storm drains, where it flowed out to sea to sully the water; until only the discarded chewing gum—stuck to the street forevermore—remained. Ominous clouds had gathered overhead, threatening to unleash a storm.

Business had been brisk tonight in the pre-Christmas rush. Some of her clients removed their wedding rings before they approached her. The white band on their tanned fingers betrayed their deceit. She masked her revulsion at their clumsy fumbling and rough hands as they pawed at her body and thrust themselves at her. She had already seen six clients that evening; three regulars and three she had not seen before. She had also turned down three others she didn't like the look of. The other sex workers teased her and called her a princess, but were glad to service her cast-offs. They tried to hide their resentment of her beauty and youth, and the fact she was able to make choices they were denied. She had won their friendship over time, and they were protective of her. They made her time on the streets bearable. They were all constantly glued to their phones and would share clips, making it a competition to find the funniest video based on the theme of the day. The winner was treated to a meal at the fast-food restaurant of their choice by the others.

They also killed time by practising elaborate dance routines they found posted online. The routines were always choreographed by earnest teenage girls, eager to create the next viral sensation. The others could not hope to match Marci's moves but they joined in, despite their obvious deficiencies. What they lacked in prowess they made up for in enthusiasm.

They kept each other company for the camaraderie but there was another acknowledged yet unspoken reason: safety. Alone you were vulnerable; Marci knew this well. It was a harsh reality of their profession. Marci would not have been able to carry on without their support. She was working with two of them tonight; Henrietta and Jo. Sandy should have been there too, but had not shown up.

‘Have either of you heard from Sandy?’ Marci asked.

‘Probably still in bed, knowing her,’ Henrietta said.

‘Lucky girl. I wish I was too,’ Jo said.

‘You’ll be in bed soon enough,’ Henrietta said.

‘But I want to sleep, not to fuck,’ Jo said.

‘She disappeared when I was with a client last night,’ Marci said, ‘I’m worried about her. She hasn’t returned my calls. She said she’d be here tonight. I know she needs the money.’

‘Don’t we all. None of us are here for fun. Apart from Jo, she loves it up her,’ Henrietta said.

‘Fuck you, Hen.’

Henrietta bent over and lifted her skirt to expose her bare buttocks.

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ Jo said, ‘She knows how to take care of herself.’

‘Don’t we all,’ Henrietta said, rubbing her crotch.

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Adam drained the last mouthful of beer from his glass. He wiped the remaining moisture from his lips with the back of his hand. He felt something rising in his throat and swallowed it down before it could escape. He set his glass down, and a wave of nausea washed over him. He grasped the edge of the table, closed his eyes, and steadied himself. When he opened his eyes again, his surroundings came back into focus. He stared at the rings, scratches, and dents on the table's lacquered wooden surface. His knuckles turned white from the force of his grip, tethering him to the world and keeping him from tipping into oblivion.

He should have paced himself, but he was in a festive mood. It was almost Christmas, and he had finished work for the year. His children had finished their sporting activities and dance classes, so he did not have to drag himself out of bed early to drive them anywhere tomorrow. Upon arriving at the pub, he had downed his first few drinks, while his colleagues were still nursing their first. With each sip, his nerves settled, and his tongue loosened. Soon, he was deep in conversation, his words flowing, sharing his opinions and musings with anyone within earshot. At first, his colleagues listened, but he failed to notice the signs of their growing disinterest. Their eyes glazed over, their gazes drifted, and nods became less frequent. One by one, they slipped away, escaping his orbit.

Adam glanced around the pub’s dim interior. His colleagues were deep in conversation. The people beside him had turned their backs, creating an unassailable

chasm. He sat forgotten between the two groups, ignored. He never felt as lonely as when he was in the company of others, a silent witness to their enjoyment.

Adam pulled his phone from his pocket. A two-word, all-caps text from his wife demanded: “GET MILK.” He chose to ignore the message and did not reply.

Despite his drunkenness, Adam decided to get another beer. He stood and cleared his throat, waiting for someone to notice him. His colleagues did not look up or acknowledge him. He thought of interrupting to ask if anyone wanted a drink, but he didn’t want to buy the last round. Instead, he slipped to the bar and ordered a beer. A bored-looking young female bartender acknowledged his request with a curt nod.

Adam rested an arm on the counter to steady himself while he waited and felt cold beer beneath his skin. He shuddered and withdrew his arm. Then, he pulled a wad of serviettes from a metal dispenser on the counter and wiped the sticky liquid from his arm. The bartender placed his drink in front of him. He paid her, and she frowned when he dropped the wet serviettes in the puddle of beer on the bar.

Adam returned to his table to discover that his work colleagues had left. He slumped into his chair, and his heart sank. He took a long swig of his beer and looked around. The area had almost drained of inhabitants. Only the most committed denizens remained, deep in conversation with their fellow drinkers. Adam was the only one sitting alone, a solitary figure among strangers. The companionship he witnessed and craved only compounded his loneliness.

Adam rose to his feet and grabbed the table for support as the room swayed around him. The sound of breaking glass jolted him back to reality. His empty pint glass lay shattered on the ground. It was time to go. The few patrons left in the pub paused to see the cause of the commotion and soon lost interest in the drab, drunken businessman. The glass crunched underfoot as he made his way to the exit.

Adam stepped out onto the neon-washed streets of Kings Cross. A boisterous group of young people passed him, oblivious to the stranger in their midst. A perennial outsider. Adam felt lonely; he craved contact with another human being. He wanted to reach out and touch someone, to hold them, to caress them, and be held. He wanted to feel something, anything—companionship, however fleeting. Home could wait; there was no intimacy for him there. The children were fast asleep, and his wife was unlikely to even notice him falling into bed.

He ambled along the pavement, heading for Oxford Street. As he moved away from the bars, the people thinned out until Adam was alone. Tears welled in his eyes. He gave in to self-pity and began to sob as the tears spilled down his cheeks. After a few minutes, the sobs subsided, and he wiped away the traces of his sadness with a shirt sleeve.

Adam was oblivious to his surroundings, absorbed in his misery. He crossed a road beside an alleyway; the sound of laughter caught his attention. He stopped, pausing for a moment to find its source. Three women in tight, revealing clothes stood smoking and talking. He guessed they were sex workers and walked towards them. As he got closer, his eyes were drawn to one of the women. He stared at Marci, transfixed by her beauty.

Marci turned to Adam, looking him up and down with calculating eyes, assessing him for signs of danger. She memorised his features in case she had to describe him later. Her instincts told her he was harmless, and her instincts were never wrong. She'd had more than enough experience with dangerous men to recognise the signs. Her friends were less discerning, often taking unnecessary risks if the money was good.

After one last drag of her cigarette, she dropped it on the street and crushed it under her foot. It was a bit large for her slim frame, Adam noticed, although her feet were far from being her defining feature. She was very attractive, even if she wore more makeup than he would prefer. She was also tall—taller than him. Adam could not help but admire her barely concealed breasts; they stood firm against her slender frame. He snatched a peek at them, his eyes betraying his intentions. He wanted her now.

'Hi honey, are you looking for some company?' Marci asked.

'Yes, I am,' Adam said.

'You do know we're trans?' she said.

'Trans?'

'Transsexual, honey. If it's a vagina you're after, you'll have to go elsewhere.'

Adam had never been adventurous when it came to sex; he liked women. He liked the way they looked, the way they felt, and the way they smelled. But he liked what he saw tonight. His desire for sex with this beautiful person had not diminished. She told him the price, and he followed her, admiring her figure. He experienced a level of excitement absent from his life for a long time. He felt like an observer, disconnected from the scene, watching someone else do something he would never contemplate. They reached a door and she knocked three times. The door was opened by a tall man, clad in a leather biker jacket. He stood aside and beckoned them inside. Adam's date sauntered past, and he followed, head down and body hunched over.

They entered the lobby of a modest house. Five women were sitting in chairs or lounging around, smoking.

'Pay the man \$50 for the room, honey,' she said.

Adam pulled a fifty-dollar note from his wallet and gave it to the man. He couldn't hide the tremble in his hand.

‘Have fun. I’ll phone when the time's up,’ the man said, pocketing the money.

Adam followed Marci up a narrow staircase. He passed a couple of closed doors before entering a small room with a double bed. The window on the left side of the bed was blacked out. A bedside table, between the window and the bed, held a lamp with a red shade and an old Bakelite phone with a round dial. Adam remembered his parents owning a similar phone when he was a child. He had heard they were worth a lot of money today, although God knows why. He remembered his family's excitement at replacing theirs with a modern push-button version. It all seemed so long ago now.

‘What’s your name?’ Adam asked.

‘Marci.’

‘I’m Adam.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Adam. Would you like to join me on the bed?’ Marci said.

She unzipped her thigh-length boots and sat on the edge of the bed. Her short dress offered Adam a glimpse of her panties. She looked him in the eyes and patted the bed beside her.

Adam walked over and stopped in front of her, savouring the moment. Looking down into her big brown eyes, she unbuttoned his trousers and let them drop. A second later, his underwear was at his ankles too. She took him into her mouth, and he felt as if he was falling in love. His wife refused to perform oral sex on him, saying it was dirty. He wondered what his wife would think if she could see him now. He thought about taking a picture with his phone and sending it to her. There would be no going back from that. It seemed like a good idea for all of three seconds before he thought about losing his children forever. Now was not the time to be thinking about his children, and certainly not his wife. This was his time, and he would be paying a steep price for it.

Adam started to unbutton his shirt. He wanted to be naked and feel his body pressed up against hers. He was afraid he might come too soon and not get everything he could from the experience. He managed to remove his shirt and began to caress Marci’s full breasts. He had never touched fake breasts before. It was a night of many firsts. Touching fake breasts was probably the least of them, but he enjoyed the new sensation.

Marci leaned away from him and slipped out of her dress, folded it, and placed it on a chair beside the bed. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and her firm breasts stood proud on her slim body. Adam stepped out of his trousers and underwear. He felt awkward, standing naked except for his shoes and socks. He dropped to one knee and removed one shoe, and then the other. He thought about leaving his socks on. He didn't want to

know what state the carpet was in or how many bodily fluids it had soaked up over the years. In the end, the socks came off, and he stood in front of Marci naked.

She pulled a condom from her bag along with a tube of lubricant. She rolled the condom down over his erect penis and kissed the tip. Adam did not like using condoms; he found the process a passion killer. He often became flaccid before he got one on and then faced the shame of another failed attempt at sex. Each time it happened, it compounded the situation until he gave up. His wife knew this and said she wouldn't have sex without a condom. Two children were enough for her. He had tried to get her to use alternative forms of contraception, but she refused. He could not remember the last time they had sex together; it was so long ago.

Tonight, the condom did not seem to bother him. He was ready for her. When Marci pulled down her panties, he gave an involuntary gasp. Her penis was bigger than his, even though his was erect and hers was flaccid. She squeezed some lube onto her fingers and then reached behind her, maintaining eye contact with Adam.

'Are you ready, big boy?' Marci asked.

'I think so,' Adam replied.

Marci rolled over on the bed and got on all fours. Adam knelt on the edge of the mattress and shuffled closer. She reached behind her, took hold of his penis, and guided him inside her. He had never had anal sex before. He had never even tried sex in doggy-style. His sexual experiences were mounting, and he was loving every second. He reached forward and massaged Marci's breasts as he thrust into her. She pushed back against him, and he felt her squeezing him from inside. He wanted the night to last forever; he held onto her hips and thrust as hard and fast as he could manage. Adam could feel himself beginning to climax. Another few seconds, and he would be in ecstasy.

He didn't get his few seconds; the phone on the bedside table rang. He jumped back out of Marci and fell to the floor. He clambered to his feet, watching as she pulled on her underwear and started to feel very inadequate.

'Time to go,' Marci said. 'There's a shower next door if you need it.'

'Just a toilet, please,' Adam said, now desperate to urinate.

'Same room next door. I'd get dressed first if I were you,' Marci said, using a wet wipe to clean herself.

Adam removed the condom and threw it in the bin. He dressed in a hurry and walked towards the bathroom, buttoning his shirt as he went. Marci was sitting on the bed, already dressed, and applying makeup while looking into her compact.

Adam stood at the toilet, hearing the sounds of sex coming from the other rooms along the corridor. He tried to pee, but it wasn't coming. He had always had a shy bladder and couldn't go in front of other people. He even found it hard if other people

were in earshot. It made life very difficult. He had wasted a lot of time waiting for a free toilet cubicle. He could not bear the indignity of standing at a urinal, unable to pee while other men did so in his presence. Despite the urgent desire to urinate, it was futile to continue trying while the sounds of other people engaged in sweaty copulation assaulted his ears. He zipped himself back up and hurried down the stairs towards the building's exit. At the bottom of the stairs, he entered a room. He saw one of the sex workers he'd seen outside with Marci. She was walking towards him, leading a sweaty, overweight man in his fifties by the hand. Adam met her eye for a second. She flashed him a quick smile. He smiled back and looked away, towards the door and his exit from the strange, alien world he had intruded upon.

Adam exited the building into the dark alleyway and paused for a second while his eyes adjusted to the gloom. He thought he heard Marci calling his name from inside, but dismissed it as a product of his overactive imagination.

The need to relieve himself came back with a sudden urgency, pushing other thoughts from his mind. He walked further up the alleyway in the opposite direction to the main road, unzipping his trousers as he went. If he didn't go soon, he would wet himself. He spied a suitable spot beside a large graffiti-encrusted wheelie bin. As he approached, something scuttled away behind it. The stench emanating from the bin was awful, but he did not have time to find more salubrious surroundings. He let out a sigh as he relieved himself against the wall. He wondered why he had no compulsion about pissing outside, and yet he couldn't manage it inside a locked toilet when other people were around. Then he heard his name again; there was no mistaking it this time. It was Marci calling him from a few meters away. She repeated his name, sounding distressed. He could not stem the flow of urine now he had started, so he called out in reply, 'Over here.'

Adam looked over his shoulder and saw Marci hurry around the corner toward him.

'There you are,' Marci said. 'You forgot something.'

'Really, what?' Adam said, wondering what had caused her to chase after him.

'My money. You disappeared without paying me.'

'Oh shit. I'm sorry, I completely forgot. Give me a minute,' Adam said.

Marci turned away and looked around, the alleyway was deserted. Henrietta and Jo were nowhere to be seen, they must have both got clients. It was still too early to call it a night and go home. Marci pulled out her phone and checked to see if Sandy had returned her messages; there was still no reply. She sent another text imploring her to respond, and let her know she was alright. Marci had a feeling that something bad had happened.

Adam was still relieving himself when he saw something scurrying out from beneath the bin, heading for his foot. It was moving too fast for him to make out what it was in the darkness. It was the size of a large rat and the colour of milk gone bad. He took a step back and aimed his stream of piss at the creature heading towards him. It darted away from the flow of urine, jumped onto his shoe, and crawled up his leg with amazing speed. It reached his left hand before he had a chance to react. He shook his hand in disgust, trying to dislodge it. Disgust gave way to intense pain as the creature tore into his flesh. He let out a scream of anguish and shook his hand with renewed vigour. Blood poured from the wound, splattering the surrounding area. He grabbed at the creature's blood-slicked body and ripped it away from where it was feasting, throwing it as far as he could.

He looked at the ragged hole in his hand. It sickened him. A large section of flesh had been eaten away, exposing the tendons. He noticed movement. In dismay, he watched as hundreds more huge, white creatures streamed from under the bin. In seconds, they had engulfed his legs and reached his exposed penis. He yelled in horror as the first cockroach bit into him. Excruciating pain shot through his crotch. Blood began to flow, sending the creatures into a feeding frenzy. He looked down and screamed.

'What's the matter?' Marci called, rushing to his aid.

She stopped a metre from Adam; the floor at his feet was alive with activity. Adam turned to face her, his fists beating at the creatures attacking his legs and crotch. His screams turned to a tortured groan of despair.

Marci could not believe the scene before her. A writhing mass of giant cockroaches had enveloped Adam's legs. Their white bodies were now painted red with gore. Acting on instinct, Marci tore open her white leather bag. She plunged her hands into its crowded depths and spilled the contents onto the floor. Her fingers finally grasped the thing she had been searching for. She ripped the lid from the capsicum spray and aimed it at the things attacking Adam. A fine mist sputtered from the can. She cursed, shook it, and doused the creatures on his lower body. The cockroaches not too absorbed in the feast retreated from the spray. They disappeared beneath the wheelie bin. Some remained, driven by the desire for fresh meat. They were not ready to give up, seeking refuge inside the ragged hole in Adam's crotch. The capsicum fumes caused tears to stream from Marci's eyes, but she did not stop spraying the creatures until the can ran dry.

Adam lost consciousness and fell forward onto his front; his head hit the ground with a sickening thud.

'Someone, help me,' Marci shouted. She rolled him over and began to drag him away from the creatures attacking him. When they got closer to the light, she saw

movement around his ruined crotch. She rained down blows on the remaining cockroaches with her handbag, using it to dislodge them from Adam's prone body.

She heard rapid footsteps behind her. They were getting closer. She turned to face two police officers as they rounded the corner. Both of them came to an abrupt halt when they reached the scene. The one closest to Marci unholstered his gun and pointed it at her.

Chapter 2

Troy ran his tongue over the ruined remnants of his teeth. Its rough surface probed the pitted and ravaged terrain of his mouth, tracing the outline of his gums. He sought out and explored the crevices, now absent of teeth. They had been lost to the abuse that was unraveling him from within. A sign of the deeper decay infecting him. His ruined taste buds could still recognise the distinctive metallic tang of blood. More alcohol would wash away the bitter taste. The shakes seized his hands, mocking his efforts to roll a cigarette from the discarded butts he had collected from the grimy, neon-lit streets of Kings Cross.

His face was a web of spider veins. Each broken blood vessel traced an erratic path to oblivion. Sweat oozed from every pore, but there was a chill within him he could not shed, despite the stifling, humid night air. Each breath was a hard-fought battle that he was in danger of losing. He succumbed to a coughing fit, doubling over, his dirt-encrusted palms braced against his knees. He continued to heave and splutter. People shot him disgusted looks or crossed the road to avoid him. He struggled on until he eventually disgorged the blockage onto the street. He wiped the blood-flecked remnants from his lips with the sleeve of his coat. The original colour of the coat had long since been obscured by the filth marring its worn surface. It exuded a ripe, musty aroma. Moisture was forever seeping into the fabric, either from Troy's own body or the torrential downpours plaguing Sydney. Tonight, his situation was desperate. In half an hour, the bottle shops would close and getting alcohol would be almost impossible.

Troy spotted a young man walking toward him, a cigarette in one hand and a mobile phone in the other. He thought of grabbing the phone and running. It would get him enough cash for a decent bottle of spirits. He was in no state to outrun a child, let alone a young man. He decided on a different gambit.

'Have you got two dollars to spare?' Troy said.

The young man looked up from his phone. A dishevelled man stood before him, hand outstretched.

'No, sorry,' he said, a hint of disgust crossing his face. Then, he turned back to his phone and quickened his pace.

'How about a cigarette then, mate?' Troy said as he shuffled along after him.

The young man dropped the cigarette he was holding and walked away. Troy bent down, snatched up his prize, and drained it in two long puffs. Cigarettes were a luxury in life, but alcohol was a necessity. It had been at least six hours since his last drink. If he didn't get alcohol, the withdrawal symptoms would get a lot worse, and he might not survive. The shakes were only the beginning. He had to get alcohol, and soon.

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John Cooper was having the greatest time of his life, traveling the world on a gap-year before starting university. Every day brought a new adventure and new experiences. The realisation that it would all be over in eight short months loomed in the back of his mind. Tonight, John was out in a bar in Kings Cross with five other people from his backpacker hostel. After dinner, they had played drinking games with cheap wine in the hostel. They were already drunk when they decided to go to a bar. Christmas was only two days away; it would be his first Christmas away from home and his family.

Sydney was John's first stop in Australia. It felt familiar and strange at the same time. He had begun his trip in Southeast Asia. It was a culture shock, but he had soon adjusted and learned to love it. Sydney felt too restrictive and regimented after the freedom and chaos he had learned to embrace. He had been in the city for two weeks, and he had already seen people refused service and thrown out of pubs for being drunk—something unheard of back in England. It was an alien concept, and didn't match the laid-back culture he expected in Australia.

John was sat beside Laura Mills, an English woman from London. Her long black hair framed a pretty face. She had brown eyes and full, sensual lips he wanted to kiss. She was a few years older than John and had already finished university. Before this trip, an older woman would have intimidated him, but he had seen and done a lot in the last four months. He had grown in confidence. John could sense a mutual attraction and was hopeful he wouldn't be spending the night in his bunk bed alone.

Laura had been in Australia for five months. She had a couple of weeks left in Sydney before she left for South America. She had spent the last four months travelling with a Dutch girl named Eva. They'd met in Perth and driven an epic four-thousand kilometres road trip in Eva's canary-yellow Holden Commodore all the way to Sydney. They sold it for scrap when it broke down a few miles from their destination. Eva was out with them tonight; she was good company—friendly, outgoing, quick to laugh, and always looking for something fun to do. This had led to some interesting experiences and wild nights. Life was never dull when Eva was around.

Tonight, they were also joined by two Germans named Finn and Tristan. John was a little unsure about them. They made an odd pair, their only similarity being their German heritage. Finn looked intimidating. He had a shaved head, a full beard, and lots of tattoos. They covered almost all the exposed skin on his broad, muscular body. Dressed all in black, only his face remained untouched by the tattooist's needle.

Tristan was altogether different. He was tall and slim to the point of being skinny, but otherwise normal. You would be hard-pressed to pick anything to distinguish him besides his prominent Adam's apple and weak chin. He was very quiet, and John thought he seemed a bit too serious or shy to have a good time with.

The last member of their group was Sam, who John had met on his first night in Sydney. He was also from England. He had been very friendly and gregarious when John first met him, but soon became over familiar and annoying. John had been trying to avoid him, but Sam had latched onto their group as they were leaving the hostel. They had already exhausted the usual backpacker topics: where they had been so far, the experiences not to be missed, and what was next on their itinerary. Sam set down his beer and fixed Laura with a piercing stare; a brief smile played across his lips.

'Where is it you're from, Laura?' Sam asked.

'London,' she replied.

'No, before that,' Sam said.

Laura knew Sam was referring to her mixed ethnicity. She could see where the conversation was going and did not like it. 'London born and bred, I've never lived anywhere else,' she said.

'What about your parents? Were they both London-born and bred?' Sam said, putting on a mock Cockney accent.

'That's right,' Laura said, hoping to shut him down and move on to another subject.

John could see Laura's discomfort and broke in. 'What about you, Sam? Where are you from?'

'Me? I'm as Aryan as they come. Adolf would have been proud,' Sam said. Finn glared at Sam while Tristan fixed his gaze on his glass of beer. He wanted Finn to put Sam in his place, or through a window. But Finn swallowed his anger. Sam continued, 'My family has resided on England's shores for generations.'

'We all originated in Africa if you go back far enough,' John said.

'Some don't have to go back that far, do we, Laura, or was it Jamaica? Let me guess; Daddy was from Jamaica and Mummy was working-class poor. They met in the pub one night and you were the result of a drunken liaison in the car park. Daddy didn't stick around but you're reminded of him each time you look in the mirror or straighten your hair. How did I do?'

'You're a prick,' John said.

'You couldn't be more wrong,' Laura said, struggling to contain her anger.

'I think you owe Laura an apology,' John said.

'Sorry, I'm usually a lot more accurate,' Sam said. 'I won't trouble to turn my powers of reasoning on the rest of you. I can tell your heritage is tedious, to say the

least, apart from the incest evident in the history of at least one of you. It's time for a drinking game, I'm far too sober,' Sam said.

'What will we play?' Eva said. She was eager to move on from the last conversation to safer territory.

'How about never fucking ever?' Sam said.

'I do not know this one,' Eva said.

'You might know it by its proper name; Never have I ever,' John said. 'The rules are simple. Someone starts by saying, "Never have I ever," followed by something they may or may not have done.' Anyone here who has done the thing mentioned has to drink, including the person whose turn it is. The person to the left goes next and the game continues until we run out of money or someone dies.'

'Sounds good to me,' Eva said.

'Sure. I'm in,' Finn said.

'Alright, I'll start us off,' Sam said. 'I have never fucking ever given a blow job.'

'That's not fair,' Eva said before taking a drink.

'Who said anything about the game being fair? Come on, Laura and John, drink up.'

'Piss off,' John said.

Laura's face flushed red with embarrassment as she took a drink.

'Your turn next, Herr Finn,' Sam said. 'It doesn't have to be about sex, but it normally is.'

'OK. Never have I ever had sex with three different people within twenty-four hours,' Finn said.

'You want to get out more,' Sam said before drinking.

Eva also took a drink and looked at Tristan who was next. Tristan looked uncomfortable. He stared into his glass, hoping it would inspire or help him escape.

'Never have I ever,' Tristan said.

'Had sex?' Sam interrupted.

'No,' Tristan said.

'No, you haven't?'

'No,' Tristan said, looking even more exasperated than before, 'I didn't mean ...' his voice trailed off.

'I'm messing with you. Go ahead,' Sam said.

'Never have I ever been to England,' Tristan said.

Everyone took a drink, apart from Tristan.

'How could you not visit England and yet you have travelled halfway around the world to come to this shithole?' Sam said.

'I thought England was a shithole when I visited,' Finn said.

‘Probably something to do with your grandparents bombing the shit out of it,’ Sam said.

Finn did not look happy and the situation was getting tense. What should have been a fun night out was becoming an excruciating evening.

‘My turn,’ Eva said, keen to defuse the situation and get on with the game. ‘Never have I fucking ever peed standing up.’

‘Nice one,’ John said, before taking a large gulp of beer.

The other four men took a drink while the women looked on and smiled at one another. It was Laura’s turn next. She tried to think of something to say to give her a break from drinking.

‘Never have I ever been to a strip club.’

Everyone except Laura had a drink.

‘Really? How boring of you,’ Sam said.

‘Strip clubs would have limited appeal for a lot of ladies. No offence, Eva,’ John said.

‘None taken,’ Eva said.

‘Oh, come on,’ Sam said. ‘Everyone likes looking at a chick in the buff. Even other birds like to look and compare. I bet Tristan loved it. How else is he ever going to get to see a nice-looking bird spreading her legs?’

‘Fuck you,’ Tristan said.

John was getting frustrated by Sam's comments. It was the kind of banter close friends in England might engage in, but it was not going down well with the Germans. Finn and Tristan both looked like they would enjoy beating Sam to death with a chair. John thought he would enjoy watching, but he hated confrontation. He attempted to think of something that would not set Sam off, and give him the ammunition to belittle one of them.

‘I have never ever had a threesome,’ John said.

Finn, Eva, and Sam all drank.

Sam drained the remaining beer from his glass and let out a large belch. ‘So, three of us have had a threesome, what are the odds?’ He said. ‘I feel like we are really getting to know one another now. Isn’t it nice when people from different nations can get together and enjoy a drink and a joke? I’ve always liked the Dutch. You guys know how to party. I always thought Germans were uptight, boring bastards, with no sense of humour. But you guys have proven me wrong.’

‘I am pleased we have set you straight,’ Finn said.

‘Maybe we should stop now and call it a night,’ John said.

‘No way,’ Sam said. ‘The night has only just started. It is my turn and I mean to have it. I can’t believe my fellow Englander would suggest throwing in the towel at

this early juncture. You should be ashamed of yourself, what would Her Majesty say? We have to set an example and show these krauts how to party. That reminds me. What is the definition of low self-esteem? Anyone ... No ... An Englishman who thinks he's just like everyone else.'

'Ha, ha. Very funny,' Finn said. He did not appear to be the least bit amused.

'Anyway. I digress. Back to the game in hand. I have never fucking ever been related to a Nazi war criminal,' Sam said.

The air drained from the room. Finn stared across the table at Sam, his hands bunched into fists and he started to rise in his seat. Eva placed a placating hand over one of Finn's clenched fists sensing a violent altercation was only moments away.

'No one's drinking,' Sam said. 'That's a surprise I must say. I'm only kidding, come on lighten up. Anyone would think you Germans had no sense of humour. Let me make amends, I'll go to the bar and get the drinks in. Come and give me a hand John.' Sam got up from the table and walked away.

'I'm really sorry about him,' John said as he stood up.

'It's not your fault your friend is an arsehole, but please warn him to watch what he says from now on, or I will break his nose,' Finn said.

John walked over to Sam at the bar, he was in a heated conversation with a female member of the bar staff.

'Come on Sheila don't be a cunt. Serve me a drink, please,' Sam said.

'I'm not being talked to like that,' said the irate woman behind the bar. She turned to one of her colleagues and shouted, 'Get Security.'

John took two steps to the side and averted his gaze, staring at the bar taps. Two large security guards marched over and stood on either side of Sam.

'I'm glad you're here,' He said. 'Please tell your serving wench to provide my drinks forthwith, and we shall hear no more about it.'

'This gentleman has been refused service for being intoxicated. He is being abusive and causing a scene. Please eject him from the premises and ensure he doesn't come back,' said the woman behind the bar.

'Come with us please Sir,' said one of the security guards.

'Oh, come on. What is the world coming to when you can't have a little joke in a bar without being bothered by two lumbering Neanderthals?'

John took another two steps away and carried on his examination of the bar taps.

'Are you with this guy?' said the bouncer closest to John.

'No, I'm ... He just came over. We don't really know him. Seems like he might be on something,' John said, trying to distance himself from Sam.

'Right, you're out of here,' said the bouncer; he grabbed Sam by the collar and marched him toward the exit.

‘Judas,’ Sam shouted. ‘Unhand me, you oaf. I’ll sue you and this miserable dive for every penny you have.’

John took a deep breath, relieved when Sam and the bouncers disappeared through the doorway. He then caught the eye of the woman behind the bar.

‘What a complete cunt,’ she said. ‘Sorry about that; what can I get you?’

‘Six... sorry, I mean five beers, please.’

*

Troy’s night had improved beyond measure. Begging for loose change on the streets had become more and more difficult over the years. Fewer and fewer people carried cash, or so they said. Tonight people were being more generous than normal. It might have been because it Christmas time, or it might have been pity compelling them to part with their money. Troy didn’t care. All that mattered was the fact he had managed to score enough cash to buy alcohol.

He had made it to a bottle shop with only minutes to spare before it closed, with just enough money for a cheap bottle of port. It was nowhere near as satisfying as a bottle of spirits, but it had staved off the effects of alcohol withdrawal for a little longer. The port inspired no festive feelings in Troy. Christmas had passed unmarked during a childhood of neglect and abuse. His mother was an alcoholic, and he had never known his father. The men who entered his mother’s life didn’t stick around for long. Troy knew when to make himself scarce and when a beating was coming. The men who physically abused him were preferable to the others, the ones who visited him at night when his mother was passed out. The alcohol wouldn’t wash away the memories, the stain was too ingrained, but each swig from the bottle made the past a little more bearable.

He had already drained three-quarters of the bottle. He knew he should ration his last remaining alcohol of the day but was unable to resist the desire for one more drink. It was time to try to obtain some more money before the bottle shops reopened in the morning, and the need for alcohol became all-consuming.

He noticed a familiar scene playing out in the doorway of a bar. A drunken reveller was being thrown out by the bouncers. Troy saw an opportunity to exploit the situation; he could attempt to befriend his fellow drunk and appeal to his sense of charity. Or, if he was very drunk, there might be a chance to relieve him of his wallet. At the very least, the situation would offer a small amount of entertainment.

Sam was thrust out of the doorway of the bar onto the street. He managed to stay on his feet and turned to face the bouncers.

‘You miserable bastards, I should report you to the police.’

‘We will be the ones calling the police if you don’t move on now. Do yourself a favour mate, and piss off.’

‘I am not, and never will be, your mate.’

‘It’s a figure of speech. I wouldn’t be mates with a scrawny little pommie sack of shit. Get out of here before you get hurt.’

Sam turned around to face a line of people queuing to get into the bar.

‘Did you hear him threaten me? I was quietly minding my own business when I was accosted by those hired thugs. Don’t grace this despicable shithole with your presence.’

‘Right, that is enough from you,’ the bouncer said. He grabbed Sam by the arm and twisted it behind his back, eliciting a gasp of pain from Sam. He leaned in close to Sam’s ear, so he could feel his hot breath against his neck. ‘Walk away now while you still can,’ he said. He pushed Sam from the pavement into the road and into the path of a passing taxi.

The taxi driver slammed on his brakes. The taxi screeched to a stop in front of Sam. He turned to face the taxi and put his hands on the bonnet of the car. He stared at the driver, a middle-aged Asian man who returned his gaze with a bewildered look. Sam was shaken by the near miss but still angry and indignant. He spat onto the windscreen of the car and stepped back.

The taxi driver leapt from his vehicle and started to shout at Sam, ‘Animal. I could have killed you.’

‘Why don’t you go and fuck yourself?’ Sam said.

The taxi driver reached inside his car and pulled out a small cricket bat. ‘Get out of here, crazy man,’ he said.

‘Or what? You’ll challenge me to a game of cricket?’

‘I will beat you,’ the taxi driver said, advancing on Sam, swinging the bat in front of him.

‘I’m sure you would beat me. You lot are good at cricket. But, I’m not in the mood for games. So, be a good sport and fuck off.’ Sam kicked the car’s front bumper to emphasise his point. He made a small dent, hurt his foot, and made the taxi driver even angrier.

‘I’ll kill you,’ the taxi driver shouted.

Troy was enjoying the spectacle and would have liked to witness the taxi driver beating Sam, but it would have been of no benefit to him. He took seized his moment and intervened.

‘No need for that,’ Troy said as he walked between Sam and the taxi driver. ‘He’s very sorry and will get out of your way.’

‘No, I’m not,’ Sam said.

‘Yes, you are,’ Troy insisted as he pulled Sam onto the pavement.

‘Unhand me, you filthy troll,’ Sam said, disgusted by the foul-smelling man gripping his arm.

‘Trust me, you need to get out of here,’ Troy said. He pulled Sam away from the taxi driver, who had ceased swinging the bat and was glaring at them while muttering under his breath.

Sam attempted to free himself from the grip of the dishevelled homeless man but was surprised by his strength as Troy held fast. Troy manoeuvred himself between Sam and the taxi driver and began to push Sam away down the street.

‘You’re lucky I didn’t stick the bat up your arse,’ Sam shouted over Troy’s shoulder.

Troy took his chance. He reached into Sam's pocket, lifted his wallet, and slipped it into his coat. Then, he pushed Sam away from the advancing taxi driver.

‘Will you just fuck off.’ Sam said to Troy.

‘Happy to,’ Troy replied, turning and walking away.

The taxi driver swung the bat at Sam, and it connected with his shoulder. Sam winced in pain and raised his arms to ward off the barrage of blows falling on him. The situation had gotten completely out of hand. Sam could have beaten his attacker if he was sober. But, he decided to flee to avoid serious injury. He turned on his heels and ran. It wasn’t long before he reached the end of the road. He looked behind and was happy to see his attacker hadn’t followed him.

Sam took a moment to get his breath back before reaching into his pocket for his cigarettes. He shook out his last cigarette and lit it, taking a long drag. His arms and shoulders were aching where the bat had connected; he would have a nice collection of bruises tomorrow. He drained the life from his cigarette and spotted a 7-11 where he could buy more. He walked to the counter, reached into his pocket for his wallet, and discovered its absence.

‘Son of a bitch,’ Sam muttered when he reached the till.

‘What did you call me?’ the shop assistant said, rising to his feet.

‘Piss off,’ Sam said as he turned and walked out of the shop.

He started to walk back to the bar. Then, he remembered the homeless man who had grabbed him during the fight with the taxi driver. He realised it must have been him who had taken his wallet. Desperate, he scanned the streets for a sign of the thief. His wallet had all his credit cards and his driving licence. It was a major inconvenience at this time of year and on the other side of the world. His Christmas and New Year in Sydney would be ruined if he didn’t get his wallet back.

He started to jog in the direction the thief had taken, cursing him as he picked up his pace. After a couple of minutes, he lost all hope of finding his wallet. Then, he

saw a familiar figure ambling off in the distance. The thief was a block ahead, heading towards the central business district, but he wasn't moving very fast. Sam hoped he hadn't already emptied and dumped his wallet, along with his cards. He slowed his pace from a jog to a fast walk, deciding to take his time in catching up to the thief. He would bide his time and wait until they were in a secluded spot, where he could exact revenge on the filthy vagrant.

Chapter 3

Marci had never been so glad to see the police before. Past experience had taught her to avoid them at all costs. But, tonight, she was relieved to see them, even if one was pointing a gun at her. 'Thank God. Call an ambulance; he's dying,' she said.

'Stop right there, raise your hands, and get down on the ground,' Grant Walker commanded, training his gun on the frantic woman before him.

'You don't understand,' Marci said.

'Drop the weapon. On your knees now, or I'll shoot,' Walker said.

'There is no need for any more violence,' Thomas Flint said. He was worried his partner would shoot the suspect at the slightest provocation. 'Do what we say, and no one else needs to get hurt.'

Marci didn't understand what weapon he was referring to. She looked down at her hands and saw her blood-soaked handbag; she dropped it beside Adam's prone body and got down on her knees.

'Help him, please,' Marci said.

'Hands behind your back,' Walker said. He advanced on Marci, keeping his gun aimed at her head.

Marci placed her hands behind her back, and Walker circled behind her.

'If you try to run, I will shoot you,' he warned. He holstered his gun and took out his handcuffs. He grabbed Marci's right wrist, pulled it up behind her back, and handcuffed her hands together. 'Go on, try to get away now, bitch.'

Flint approached the victim and scanned the scene for a potential murder weapon. As he got closer, the full horror of the situation became evident. He fought to hold on to the contents of his stomach when his gaze landed on the gory mess visible through Adam's open trousers. Squatting down, he checked Adam's vital signs but couldn't find a pulse at his neck. He noticed the victim had lost a considerable amount of blood, along with his genitals. It was a mercy he was already dead, and any efforts to revive him were likely to be unsuccessful. He radioed back to headquarters to report the situation.

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Thomas Flint said a silent prayer for the dead man at his feet. He felt terrible that there was nothing more he could do for the poor unfortunate soul. Helping people in need was the reason he had joined the force. To him, protection and prevention were far more important than punishment. His partner Walker, on the other hand, lived to punish.

Flint's friendly, rational approach helped to de-escalate tense situations. Preferring to seek compromise and appeal to a person's sense of propriety. This resulted in almost no complaints against him from the general public. Although his arrest record was also the lowest in the city. Walker was the opposite. He had the most complaints and the highest arrest record of any officer. They could not stand one another.

Flint struggled to understand how Walker had ever made it onto the police force. The man did not have a shred of decency and lacked empathy for his fellow human beings. He assumed everyone was guilty of something. So, they deserved his contempt. Flint found it impossible to appeal to Walker's better nature because he did not have one. Flint had joined up to make his part of the world a safer, better place. To protect the innocent and downtrodden from people like Walker. He was exactly the kind of person Flint detested—a bully drawn to the job by the power it conferred, rather than a desire to serve or do good.

Flint, a devout Christian, regarded his partnership with Walker as a sacred trial. He saw the redemption of Walker as his mission. Despite finding Walker and his values repugnant, Flint remained committed. Flint doubted Walker could change. Yet, he refused to question God's plan. He believed there was no greater calling: Walker's soul was at stake.

*

Walker hated Flint's holier-than-thou, Christian compassion for the street scum. The Bible basher was always trying to tell him how to do his job. He considered it to be a damned impertinence. They were put together on this shift because Flint was too afraid to arrest anyone. He needed Walker to do his dirty work.

Flint made him sick. They had turned the police into a laughing stock and, worse still, a target. In his opinion, weak men like Flint had no place on the force.

Walker's superiors would warn him about being too harsh on scumbag criminals. They had to be seen to be doing what was expected of them. They needed him, so they tolerated him. Otherwise, he would not be allowed back on the streets, again and again.

'Get up,' Walker commanded, gripping Marci's arm and jerked her to her feet.

'You're hurting me,' Marci said.

'I haven't even started,' Walker said, keeping his voice low so Flint wouldn't hear.

Flint was occupied securing the scene before the arrival of more police units. Walker saw an opportunity to inflict a measure of suffering on Marci before formal processing at the station stripped him of the chance. He had already judged her guilty.

To Walker, CCTV in police custody areas blocked effective, immediate justice. He saw it as a hindrance. Its purpose was to protect officers and the judicial process. But it got in the way of his preferred harsh methods for dealing with suspects. Those methods bypass formal judicial procedures for summary punishment.

Loopholes and lack of oversight allowed some discretion in handling suspects out of view of the cameras. But tighter regulations and scrutiny from legal advocates closed these gaps. This annoyed Walker. He recalled a time when extrajudicial corrections were tolerated. He lamented the shift toward greater accountability in law enforcement.

Now, with everything being automated and backed up to a secure server, it was safer to dish out justice here, on the street, away from prying eyes. Most of his colleagues understood, but Flint just didn't get it; he had even threatened to report Walker for misconduct. The bloody dog. It just wasn't done. No matter what your colleagues did, you always backed them up. Anything else was suicide.

Walker decided Flint was going to have to be taken care of if he didn't buck his ideas up and get behind him. There was no way he was going to lose his job because of the little prick. If some of the stuff he'd done over the years got out, he could get some serious time inside. Ex-police were treated worse than nonces. There was no way he was going to let that happen, no way at all.

Walker marched Marci into the shadows towards the alleyway wall. He pushed her until her nose was almost touching it. He glanced over his shoulder to confirm Flint wasn't watching, his partner had his back to them and was busy scribbling notes in his pocketbook.

'I'm going to search you for concealed weapons,' he said. 'Have you got any hypodermic syringes on your person? I don't want to spike myself with some filthy AIDS-infested needle.'

'Honey, look at my dress. There is nowhere to conceal anything. Everything I have is in my handbag or scattered on the floor over there.'

'You better not be lying to me or there will be consequences. Spread your legs,' Walker commanded, ready to proceed with his search, blending threat with procedure.

He looked Marci up and down. There was nowhere to conceal a weapon in her skimpy outfit. Her white skin-tight dress clung to her slim frame, emphasising her curves and small waist. Walker put his hands on her hips and squeezed. He was going to enjoy this. He slid his fingers upwards until they reached her breasts and cupped them in both hands. They were large and firm; he guessed they were fake, but he didn't mind.

'I bet you like that, don't you, bitch?' he said.

Marci felt his hot breath against her neck. He rubbed his engorged penis against her and pinched her nipples through the thin fabric of her dress. She looked over her shoulder for Henrietta and Jo, but they were no where to be seen. The other police officer had his back to them.

‘Face the wall, bitch.’

‘Stop. You’re hurting me.’

‘Filthy whore. Keep your mouth shut, or you’ll find out what real pain is.’

He gave her nipples a final twist, eliciting a gasp from Marci. He slid his hands down her body to her hips, bringing his hands around to grab her buttocks. He moved his groping fingers down to the exposed flesh of her thighs, panting heavily with anticipation of his next move. He slid his hands back up her legs and hooked his thumbs under her dress, pulling it up to her hips. He savoured the sight of her nakedness, which was only concealed by the tiny strip of material of her underwear.

‘Let’s see what you’re hiding up there,’ he said, and slid a hand up between her thighs.

Walker jumped back in surprise when his probing fingers encountered Marci’s genitalia. ‘What the fuck? You dirty fucking bastard,’ he said, his disgust caused him to forget about his partner close by. He reached up, snatched a handful of Marci’s hair in his fist, and yanked her head back so she could feel his hot breath on her neck. ‘We’ve got clippers back at the station for lice-infested vermin like you. I’ll shave your head bald so you don’t fool anyone else into thinking you’re a woman. Or maybe I’ll pay you a visit later; I’ll bring my knife and cut off the big cock and balls you’re hiding under your dress, turn you into a real woman.’

He wrenched her hair so hard she thought he would rip it out. She was transported back to her childhood, when her father had terrorised her. She wasn’t a defenceless child any longer. She stamped down on Walker’s foot with the heel of her boot; he grunted in pain and smacked her head into the wall. Flesh and bone met unyielding brick with a sickening thud, dazing her and sending stars dancing in front of her eyes.

‘Pull down your fucking dress,’ Walker said.

‘I can’t, my hands are cuffed. You’ll have to uncuff me or do it yourself.’

‘You’ll wait,’ he said and tugged her dress back down to cover her exposed flesh. ‘When we get you back to the station, I’ll see that you suffer.’