



**THE
DISAPPEARANCE
OF ANNA
POPOV**

A JACK ROGAN MYSTERY

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AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNA POPOV

A dark, page-turning psychological thriller, with a dash of the paranormal and the
occult

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 2

Gabriel Farago

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The lips of wisdom are closed
Except to those ears that can hear.

The Cabbala

For Joan, my guiding hand.

Always steady;

Always strong;

Always there.

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Gabriel Farago

Leura, Blue Mountains, Australia

The world hangs by a thread
And that is the psyche of man

Carl Gustav Jung

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I first came across the story of Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance in the remote Kimberley in Western Australia. Leaning against a 700 year old boab tree with my Aboriginal guide – a Bunuba elder – I was looking up at the tall cliffs guarding the entrance to Windjana Gorge; his country. We had just visited some stunning Aboriginal rock art – haunting paintings thought to be more than twenty thousand years old. Rising like a fortress out of the glare, the tall cliffs – remnants of an ancient Devonian reef – formed a forbidding barrier between his world and mine.

‘This is where it all happened,’ the old man said, pointing into the deep gorge cut through the rock by the Lennard River. ‘And it wasn’t that long ago. Jandamarra’s cave is just up there.’

Jandamarra was an Aboriginal freedom fighter in the 1890s who refused to surrender his country and his freedom to the white settlers pushing relentlessly north.

As the shadows lengthened, I listened to the remarkable story of first contact between the Bunuba and the early Australian pastoralists. It was a stirring tale of heroism and despair, unspeakable brutality and acts of great courage. It was the final chapter in the long history of a proud people. With the story ending in tragedy, the painful words turned into a whisper of defeat, falling from the lips of one of its last true elders. Caught between two worlds, Jandamarra had tried to find a way of embracing the new, but the old was in his blood and could not be denied.

This conflict is by no means over. It exists today. Colliding cultures send ripples of discord far into the future and affect generations. It is as relevant today as it was in Jandamarra’s time. The stage is the same, so is the plot. Only the actors are different.

As the embers of our campfire turned slowly to ash, I began to wonder ... *What if Jandamarra had lived today? What if ...*

Gabriel Farago

Leura, Blue Mountains, Australia

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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ANNA POPOV

PROLOGUE

Alice Springs, January 2005

Anna was dancing in The Shed the night she disappeared. The Shed was a notorious watering hole frequented mainly by thirsty truckies. It called itself a bush pub, but that was an exaggeration. It was more like a long wooden bar with a corrugated iron roof held up by gnarled fence posts and barbed wire. There were no walls. The floor, hard as rock, was red desert earth compacted by thousands of feet shuffling to the bar for a drink. Because the beer was always cold and the steaks huge and cheap, the place was always packed. More recently, however, there was one more added attraction: backpackers, mainly girls, touring the Outback. Looking for cheap grog and adventure, the young nomads had made The Shed their own. Located three kilometres out of Alice, it was within easy walking distance of the youth hostels and budget motels popular with tourists.

A local bush band was playing country and western music and the mouth-watering aroma of frying onions and sizzling sausages drifted across from the barbecue. It was very hot and very late.

‘Beer, mate?’ asked the barmaid, sizing up the tall dark stranger.

The handsome Aboriginal took off his broad-rimmed drover’s hat, wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief and nodded. ‘One for your friend as well?’ she asked, pointing to the huge snake wound around his neck and shoulders.

‘No thanks, she’s driving,’ he said, affectionately stroking the exquisite python.

Standing at the other end of the bar, a group of truckies were eyeing off the girls on the improvised dance floor. ‘Look, the sheilas have to dance with each other ’cause there’re no blokes here having a go,’ said one, downing another beer.

‘I bet you can’t get them to dance with you, mate; not even one,’ said another, patting his friend on the hairy beer gut bulging over his shorts. ‘Just look at you, you slob.’

‘Sure can.’

‘Oh yeah? You’re all talk. What’s it worth?’

‘Ten rounds.’ The others laughed.

‘You’re on.’

The man slammed down his glass, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and belched loudly. Pulling down his singlet to cover part of his protruding gut, he slipped his thongs back on and shuffled unsteadily towards the dance floor.

Barefoot and wearing the briefest of shorts and a tight-fitting pink tee shirt accentuating her firm breasts, Anna, silky blonde hair swishing against the tips of her tanned shoulder blades, was dancing with her friend Julia. Anna was looking for freedom, Julia for the adventure which the novelty of travel to remote places invariably offered. The Shed had it all. Excitement, danger, and the lure of the unknown far away from the watchful eyes of fretting parents and curious friends. Enjoying her favourite Dixie Chicks song, Anna swayed from side to side with her eyes closed, letting the familiar beat of the music carry her away. When it stopped and she opened her eyes, she almost bumped into the grotesque fat man towering over her.

‘How about a dance, luv?’ said the fat man, his bald head glistening with sweat.

‘No thanks,’ she snapped, turning away. ‘He’s gross,’ she whispered to Julia. ‘Let’s take a break.’

As his mates at the bar roared laughing, a flash of anger raced across the face of the fat truckie.

‘Come on, sweetie, just one. Be a good sport,’ he persisted, putting a heavy, sweaty hand on Anna’s shoulder.

‘Get off me!’ shouted Anna, pushing the fleshy hand away in disgust.

His mates at the bar began to whistle and hoot. Instead of walking away, the fat man grabbed Anna from behind, spun her around and lifted her up like a rag doll. Pressing her against his huge chest, he lumbered awkwardly around the dance floor like a dancing bear, performing his tricks at the fair. Anna, the man’s hot beer breath in her face, began to retch.

The man with the snake sipped his beer and watched the odd couple stagger across the dance floor. Slowly, he unwound the python, lifted it over his head and gently put it down on the bar.

‘Look after her for me, luv,’ he said to the barmaid, ‘she’s harmless. I’ll be right back.’ He walked slowly over to the dance floor.

‘That’s enough, mate. Put her down,’ he said, patting the fat man on the back.

The truckie turned his head and glared, his bloodshot eyes slightly unfocused.

‘Fuck off, darkie. This is none of your business,’ he hissed angrily.

The snake man’s right hand shot up in silent reply and grabbed the fat man’s ear. ‘I don’t think you heard me,’ he said, twisting the ear. ‘Let her go.’

The fat man let go of Anna, clenched his fists and spun around.

The tall man let go of the ear and stepped back.

The fat man charged – 120 kilos of rage.

Like most professional fighters, the tall man had the waist of a ballerina and the shoulders of a weightlifter. Rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, he stood poised like a cat watching its prey. He sidestepped the charge easily, letting the fat man crash into the bar.

‘Fight, you fucking coward!’ bellowed the fat man, picking himself up.

‘Okay.’

The tall man exploded into action. The first punch, delivered by his left fist, landed on his opponent’s beer gut and went deep. The second, delivered by his right, caught the fat man on the left cheek and broke a bone. The fight was over in an instant. Two more massive blows, one to the chin and one to the nose, finished the truckie off.

‘Anyone else?’ the tall man asked, squaring his shoulders. No one stepped forward. ‘He had it coming. It’s over. Get back to your beers.’

The tall man walked to the far end of the bar, uncoiled the snake which had wound itself around a post, and slung it over his shoulders.

‘Thanks for looking after her, luv,’ he said to the barmaid. ‘One more for the road, please.’ Gulping down his beer, he reached for his hat, threw a few coins on the bar and walked out into the darkness.

Julia put her arm around her friend. ‘Are you alright?’ she asked, a worried look on her face. Anna nodded. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here before they all have a go at each other and we’re caught in the middle.’ The two girls left the dance floor and hurried outside.

‘Shouldn’t we wait for the others?’ asked Anna. ‘One of the guys from the hostel had a car.’

‘No. They’re out the back, eating. We can walk. It isn’t far.’

The road leading into Alice was deserted. The girls took off their shoes and walked along the warm asphalt.

‘Did you see that guy with the snake? What a hunk! And I couldn’t even thank him. Pity.’

The powerful V8 of the ute purred into life after the girls had walked past. Inching slowly forward without lights, it left the car park behind The Shed and headed slowly for town. Startled by the engine noise coming towards them out of the dark, the girls turned around. The headlights came on suddenly, momentarily blinding them.

‘Get off the road!’ shouted Anna, pushing her friend into the bushes.

The ute accelerated and screeched to a halt next to them. ‘Walking along the road after midnight isn’t such a great idea. Especially ’round here,’ said a voice through the open driver’s window.

‘Look who it is,’ whispered Julia excitedly.

‘Hop in. I’ll give youse a lift back to town.’

‘Come on,’ said Julia, pulling Anna out of the bushes. ‘Julia, don’t!’ cried Anna. ‘No hitchhiking, remember?’

‘It’s all right ... he’s your hero.’ Julia walked over to the car and opened the passenger door. ‘You scared us,’ she said, climbing in.

The snake man smiled at her, revving the engine. Reluctantly, Anna climbed in after her friend and closed the door.

1

Sydney Harbour, New Year's Eve 2009

The old year was dying. 'Five, four, three, two, one ...' counted the cheering crowd as the final seconds of 2009 tumbled through the hourglass. Suddenly, the massive steel arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge erupted, forming a dazzling tiara of sparks. As it raced along the girders from both sides towards the centre like fire-breathing dragons, the fireworks spectacular lit up the night sky. Meeting in the middle between the main deck and the top of the arch, light and colour engaged in a breathtaking duel, heralding a turbulent year to come.

'Happy New Year, Jack!' shouted the stunning young woman standing next to Jack Rogan on the crowded yacht. Rebecca Armstrong reached up, threw her slender arms around his neck and kissed him passionately on the mouth. It was the first time she had kissed her famous client.

'Wow! I thought a kiss like this was strictly the province of the writer's imagination,' said Jack, coming up for air. 'Happy New Year, Becky!'

Rebecca flicked her glossy dark hair from her flushed face – as women who know they have beautiful hair often do – and took him by the hand. 'Don't get used to it. Tonight's an exception. Come on. I have a surprise for you,' she said.

'I like surprises.'

Heads turned as Rebecca pushed through the crowd with Jack by her side. Radiating sophistication and style in her New York designer clothes, she made straight for the stern of the yacht.

As the captain navigated the pitching vessel through the tightly packed spectator fleet under the Harbour Bridge, the yacht almost collided with an ostentatious motor cruiser. Sounding like a warning, the deep, throaty foghorn of a large ocean liner tied up at Circular Quay added to the crazy cacophony welcoming the new year. An acrid, phosphorous, eye-watering gunpowder smell of spent fireworks cartridges filled the balmy air as a smoke haze drifted past the Opera House.

'Who are all these people?' asked Jack, waving a hand at the crowd on the deck.

'The Sydney literary set. Don't you recognise anyone?' asked Rebecca, frowning.

‘I’m new to all this, remember?’

‘They all seem to know you ...’

‘Am I paying for it?’ Jack asked anxiously.

‘No, Jack. Your publisher is. Relax. Look who’s over there.’ She pointed to a tall, sandy-haired man in a crumpled checked shirt leaning casually against the mast with a bottle of beer in his hand.

‘China!’ yelled Jack, walking over to his friend. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Spinner! Your girlfriend invited me. Cheers!’ They touched glasses. ‘And a few of your other neglected mates as well.’ The sandy-haired man pointed to the bow of the crowded vessel.

‘She isn’t my ...’ said Jack, lowering his voice.

‘China?’ asked Rebecca. ‘He told me his name was Will.’

‘It is,’ replied Jack, laughing. ‘China’s his nickname.’

‘*China*? How come?’

‘My little mate, rhymes with china plate; china. Simple – see?’

‘You Aussies are something else,’ said Rebecca, shaking her head. ‘I can see I’ve a lot to learn.’

‘Thanks Becky,’ said Jack, giving her a hug, ‘very thoughtful of you.’ Her firm, toned body sent a ripple of excitement racing up his spine.

During his whirlwind book-signing tour across the US, Jack had repeatedly complained that he missed Sydney and his Aussie friends.

The surprise New Year’s Eve party on Sydney Harbour was his publisher’s response.

‘You’ve got to watch Will, he’s quite a lad,’ warned Jack, a sparkle in his eyes.

‘Don’t listen to Spinner,’ said Will.

‘*Spinner*? Not another nickname!’ said Rebecca.

‘Sure is,’ replied Will. ‘He’s always spinning yarns – right?’

The two men could have been mistaken for brothers, not only because of their rugged good looks, but also because of their good-natured banter suggesting a deep friendship forged by years spent together. Both were clearly outdoor types. Will’s tanned face – lined by laughter and a little too much sun – hinted at laid-back good humour, whilst Jack’s piercing green eyes and athletic physique were a magnet for women of all ages.

‘You’re a lucky bastard, mate,’ said Will.

‘How come?’

‘She’s not bad,’ said Will pointing with his glass to Rebecca. ‘Girlfriend?’

‘No, mate.’

‘Sure ...Don’t tell me you haven’t ...?’

‘No, seriously. My publishers told me I needed help with PR, book signings, publicity, stuff like that. You know what I’m like. So, they appointed her to look after all that crap for me. You should see her office in New York. She’s very good,’ said Jack. ‘Strictly business.’

Will wasn’t convinced. ‘I’ve heard that one before,’ he said. ‘You and women ...Lucky bastard.’

‘Perhaps I am.’

‘Perhaps? Jet-setting author with yachts and champagne and classy chicks like this one to look after you? You’ve come a long way, Spinner.’

‘It all happened very fast.’

‘I can see that, but you hardly have time for your old drinking buddies anymore,’ lamented Will.

‘I haven’t got time to scratch myself.’

‘Just look around, mate. This crowd isn’t you.’

As a freelance journalist, Jack Rogan depended on his eclectic network of contacts and friends for leads and inspiration. It was Will who had given Jack the lead to a great story two years before – the trial of a Nazi war criminal that exposed a secret hoard of Nazi gold in the vaults of Swiss banks.

When Jack published *Dental Gold and Other Horrors* it was an international success. The Swiss, embarrassed by the outcries about ‘abandoned’ bank accounts of thousands of Holocaust victims, finally agreed to open their ledgers. This was seen by many as the first serious step towards compensation. Overnight, Jack had become a celebrated *Time* magazine front page hero, and his book a sensation.

‘Come on, Will, it’s not that bad,’ retorted Jack, handing his friend a glass of champagne. ‘Here, drink up!’

The famous Sydney New Year’s Eve fireworks were reaching their climax with a

multicoloured waterfall of sparks cascading from the deck of the bridge into the ink-blue waters of the harbour below.

‘So – what next, mate?’ asked Will, draining his glass.

‘I’m taking a couple weeks off. First break in two years.’

‘Then why don’t you come with me?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m taking some time off too ... Going bush, out west ...’

‘Fossicking for bric-a-brac and old furniture?’

‘Exactly. And I still have the old van.’

‘I don’t believe it! Just like the good old days, eh?’

‘Some things never change, mate. Do you reckon they might have some more beer around here? I’m sick of this foreign crap,’ said Will.

Jack pointed an accusing finger at his friend. ‘This is Bollinger, you peasant,’ he said. ‘The best.’

‘I don’t give a stuff. It’s crap.’

‘I’ll see what I can do. When are you leaving?’

‘As soon as I sober up.’

‘I tell you what. You clear it with Becky, and I’m in.’

‘Well, well! I never thought I’d see the day. Jack Rogan actually in awe of a woman. Asking for permission?’ said Will, shaking his head.

‘You don’t know these Yankee broads, mate. Tough as old boot leather. And besides,’ continued Jack lowering his voice, ‘they hold the purse strings.’

‘You go and find me a beer, Spinner, and leave her to me.’

‘Good luck.’ *Poor bastard,* thought Jack. *She’ll eat him alive!*

2

Somewhere in the bush near Bathurst, 1 January, 2010

The old van lurched alarmingly to one side – tortured gears crunching loudly – and began the steep descent down into the valley. Jack woke with a start. Rubbing his aching shoulder – a constant reminder of the sniper’s bullet that ended his stint as a war correspondent in Afghanistan – he turned to Will.

‘Where are we?’ he asked, reaching for his sunglasses.

‘Goldmining country. We just passed Bathurst. Good sleep? A little too much Bollinger, perhaps?’ suggested Will good-naturedly. ‘You should have stuck to the beer, mate.’

‘What did you tell her?’ Jack asked. Leaving the party at dawn with Will to go back home and pack was still a blur.

‘I suggested she let you go for a month, and after a bit of argy bargy, we settled for a week. Done and dusted. She’s taking a few days off as well. Barrier Reef. That helped. But you’re right, she’s one tough cookie. She even challenged me to a drinking contest – vodka shots – before she agreed. We must have downed a dozen, I reckon.’

‘Who won?’

‘You’re here, aren’t you? The things I do for a chum.’

‘Where are we staying?’

‘Camping, Jack. Just like we used to. I know a good spot up in the hills by the creek. This area used to be Dad’s favourite, remember? The gear’s in the back,’ Will said, ‘including the old tent.’

‘It leaked like a sieve,’ said Jack. He was beginning to have second thoughts. Maybe New Year’s Eve nostalgia and a little too much champagne had got the better of him.

As young men, he and Will had been inseparable. Will’s family had taken in the fresh-faced Queensland country boy as one of their own.

The two lads had accompanied Will’s father on many a buying trip, going from farm to farm in remote rural areas and offering to buy old stuff nobody needed. Buy cheaply, take the goods back to Sydney, do them up a bit in the workshop behind the house and then sell them for a handsome profit in the shop at the front.

‘Presentation is everything,’ Will’s dad used to say. ‘Remember boys, the wrapping can be more important than the present.’ He had made a good living out of this for over fifty years. After he passed away, Will continued the tradition once a year or so, for old times’ sake. Jack had many fond memories of those trips: delicious roast dinners with a farmer and his family in the cosy kitchen; sitting on the veranda of a remote homestead with a cold beer at the end of a long hot day; and many a romp in the hay with a farmer’s daughter. Even, sometimes, his wife. Or both.

Most of the furniture in Jack’s house came from these excursions. It was surprising what curios had found their way to Australia and were waiting in disused sheds or in the back of barns to be discovered by someone with imagination and an eye for value. Jack and Will used to joke about it often. The father’s buying trips had turned into a nostalgic treasure hunt for the son and his friend.

After putting up the old tent by the creek, Will made a fire and cooked some sausages. ‘What’s she really like?’ he asked, stoking the fire.

‘Becky?’

‘Yea.’

‘To tell you the truth, I don’t know her that well.’

‘How come?’

‘We’ve been flat out these last couple of months travelling together, on and off. All business.’

‘She’s a good looker, that’s for sure. Very sexy; great body. She must be pushing 40, surely?’

‘She’s a bit of a health buff.’

‘What? All carrot juice and push-ups?’

‘No. Yoga and karate. She’d deck us both in three seconds flat. I’ve seen her do it. Very fit.’

‘Bodyguard as well. Impressive.’

‘She’s also very smart, sophisticated and incredibly well connected.

She knows all the right people.’

‘Single?’

‘Yes.’

‘Boyfriend?’

‘Not as far as I know. Career type; too busy.’

‘Well, then?’

‘What?’

‘Come on, mate, it’s me you’re talking to. She’d be great in the sack.’

‘I don’t look at her that way. She’s a professional. She takes care of my business interests. The royalties; the financial side of things.’

‘Don’t give me that crap.’

‘No, I’m serious. Never put your dick in the cash register, as my first editor used to say.’

‘You must have at least thought about it.’

‘Hmm ...There’s something about her ... I can’t put my finger on it, but ...’

‘She sure likes you ...’ interrupted Will.

‘You can tell, can you?’

‘She and I are drinking buddies – remember?’

‘Well, that explains it ...’

‘We’ll see. Here; done.’ Will took the pan off the fire and put the sausages on a plate. Accidentally touching the hot pan, he burnt his fingers and almost dropped it. ‘Shit! Throw us another tinnie, mate, and let’s get stuck into it.’

They were both asleep just after sundown.

‘There’s enough grog in here to get an entire football team pissed several times over, but no food at all,’ complained Jack next morning, searching in vain for some eggs and bacon for breakfast.

‘I’m the alcohol technician, you’re the cook, remember?’ replied Will, tinkering with his fishing gear. ‘I fixed dinner last night, mate. Breakfast is your job.’

‘Sausages. Big deal.’

‘If you don’t like the tucker, get some fresh stuff. The village is just down the road.’

‘Okay.’

The only thing open in the tiny hamlet was the corner store which also served as the post office and petrol station. The man behind the counter turned out to be the local real

estate agent minding the store for a mate who'd gone to visit family. Inquisitive by nature, the agent was intrigued by the old van with 'Arthur Hamilton & Son – second-hand furniture bought and sold' prominently painted on its sides. The business logo – a laughing kookaburra perched on the arm of a rocking chair – reminded him of a biscuit tin popular in the 1950s. After half an hour of small talk, Jack had managed to buy some meagre provisions. He had also managed to arrange their first assignment.

By the time he manoeuvred the van back into camp, it was already lunchtime and very hot. Holding a fishing rod with one hand, Will was dozing under a tree by the creek.

'Enjoying your holiday, mate?' asked Jack, unpacking the groceries. 'Here, look at this.' He handed Will a crumpled piece of paper.

'What's that?'

'A map.'

'Oh?'

'Our first assignment. You didn't think I drove this contraption all the way into the village just to buy some eggs?'

'And you didn't think I invited you along just because you're a famous author, eh?' retorted Will. 'Be a good sport and throw us a tinnie.'

They waited until late afternoon had taken the sting out of the sun before setting out to find the farm. Following a rutted track for several kilometres, they turned a sharp corner and stopped in front of a wooden gate which had all but rotted off its hinges.

'What a dump,' said Jack, pushing the gate open with his shoulder. 'The agent did warn me the place is about to be demolished. No one's lived here in years. A stockbroker from Sydney just bought it and wants to get rid of all the furniture and stuff. The agent said we should grab what we want and meet him in the village tomorrow to make an offer. This could be our lucky day.'

Will looked around the ramshackle yard. 'I doubt it,' he said and shook his head.

The abandoned homestead had definitely seen better days. Part of the wooden structure had been destroyed by fire and was open to the elements. The front door was missing and the corrugated iron roof of the veranda had collapsed. Most of the windows were broken. Coming closer, Jack noticed something shiny and tightly coiled like a sailor's rope on the

deck of a yacht, glistening in the sunlight. *Shit! A red bellied black*, thought Jack, watching the deadly snake sunning itself on the warped floorboards of the porch; an ominous sentinel, guarding the entrance to a forbidden place.

‘You got a bum steer, mate. The place is empty. We’re wasting our time,’ said Will. He turned around and began to walk back to the van. ‘Let’s go.’

‘The agent said all the stuff’s in a barn behind the house – see?’ Jack kept an eye on the snake, and picked his way carefully through the tall grass. ‘Here, give me a hand.’ Together they pushed open the old wooden door and peered inside.

The small barn was filled with all kinds of furniture, kitchen utensils, farming implements and carpentry tools. Broken crockery, pages torn from books and magazines, crumpled old newspapers and an assortment of cutlery and pottery shards littered the floor. Everything was covered in dust.

‘Well, well, what have we here then, eh?’ asked Jack, squinting into the gloom.

Will picked up a candle from the floor and lit it. ‘Look at this,’ he said.

‘What’s that?’

‘A harmonium.’ Will pulled over a rickety stool, sat down in front of the keyboard and began to operate the bellows with the broken foot pedals. He handed the candle to Jack and started to play. At first, the air in the protesting bellows responded with a tortured, wheezing sound, but it soon turned into a melody, faint and church organ-like. The hymn sounded eerie and out of place in the barn filled with abandoned possessions of generations past.

‘I didn’t know you could play.’

‘Sunday school. You never forget.’

They pushed the harmonium aside and began to explore the barn.

Their curiosity aroused, they opened tea chests, emptied drawers and peered into hat boxes and armoires crammed with vintage clothing. They pored over photo albums filled with sepia portraits of dapper gentlemen wearing their Sunday best and Victorian matrons staring blankly into space. Pulling funny faces, they tried on waistcoats, bonnets and bowler hats and took turns parading in front of the cracked dressing table mirror.

Outside, the afternoon had turned to night, the shrill, monotonous hum of cicadas the only intrusion on the stillness. Exhausted, they lay down on an old double bed next to the

window.

‘It’s a strange feeling, isn’t it?’ said Will.

‘What is?’

‘Being surrounded by all this stuff that once belonged to real people. Now long gone.’

‘It is a bit,’ said Jack.

‘It makes you feel ... vulnerable.’

‘In what way?’

‘Here we are, both in our prime, yet ...’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘The Ferryman is never that far away ...’

‘That’s a bit morbid,’ said Jack.

‘It’s true, though. We don’t know how much time we’ve got ...’

‘No, we don’t. And yes, one day we’ll have to pay the Ferryman. But ...’

‘What?’ asked Will.

‘Not yet. Go to sleep.’

Unable to fall asleep, Will looked through the broken window panes at the stars blazing above and listened to the regular breathing of his friend lying fast asleep next to him. Feeling suddenly quite cold, he got up and began to search for something to cover himself with.

This’ll do, he thought, reaching for the old moth-eaten Army overcoat he had tried on before. *I wonder what horrors this has seen?*

When Will pulled the coat up to his chin to keep warm, a dank smell assaulted his nose, conjuring up images of trench warfare, whistling shells, mateship and blood. *Smells of death*, he thought, pushing the coat aside. *Would Jack lay down his life to save a mate?* Will asked himself, *like many of the Diggers have done? I think he would.* Will closed his eyes. *Could I do the same? I guess only the real thing can answer that*, he thought and drifted to sleep.

By the time they woke up and began to load up the van, the first rays of morning sun had kissed the tiny beads of dew glistening like tears on the broken window panes.

3

Rose Cottage, Sydney, 9 January 2010

Rebecca Armstrong got out of the taxi and looked at the small sandstone cottage. It wasn't what she had expected. *I should have worn my jeans and a tank top*, she thought, looking at her tight-fitting designer slacks, high heel shoes and crisp Chanel blouse. She adjusted her hair and, clutching her tiny two-thousand-dollar handbag, walked to the front door and rang the bell.

'So, this is where the world-famous Aussie author lives,' she said, following Jack into the cottage. 'Interesting ...Homes tell us so much, don't you think?'

'They do?'

'About the people inside. Are you ready to give up your secrets?'

'Secrets? What secrets? This is a bachelor pad. A bolthole and sanctuary wrapped in one. It's all I could afford after the divorce. Sorry – I lost track of time.' Jack took off his leather apron and laid it over the back of a chair. 'I was just polishing an old secretaire out in the courtyard.'

'You were doing – what?'

'I'm restoring an antique. My booty from the little buying trip you so kindly allowed me to go on.'

'Your friend was very persuasive.'

'I did warn you about him.'

'I'm a big girl.'

'Here, I'll show you. How did you like the Barrier Reef?'

'It took my breath away.'

The back of the cottage opened into a small courtyard garden with a fountain in the middle. The small ornate desk stood on a drop sheet next to the fountain.

'This is beautiful. What is it?'

'A cedar secretaire, circa 1870, made by one of the early cabinetmakers of Sydney. Here, look at the trade label – "W. Jones & Son of Ross Street, Glebe". Its opening is cantilevered forward and decorated with two blind drawers,' said Jack, folding down the top of the secretaire. 'There are three more drawers under here – see – supported by two

turned full columns. There should also be a secret compartment somewhere in there. I was just trying to find it when you arrived.'

Rebecca held up her hand. 'Stop it,' she said, laughing. 'You sound like one of those judges on the Antiques Road Show.'

'Sorry. That's collector's speak, I'm afraid. I don't notice it anymore.'

'You're a dark horse, Jack Rogan.'

'I like working with my hands. I collect antiques, mainly early Australian colonial furniture. When I can afford it. Ah, here it is,' said Jack, exploring the back of one of the drawers with the tips of his fingers, 'the secret compartment. There must be a brass spring somewhere in here, and a knob. Yes! You pull it out,' he said. 'Who knows what treasures are hidden within?'

'How exciting!' Rebecca reached inside and carefully pulled out the little cedar drawer. 'Empty, I'm afraid,' she said, holding up the exquisite little box.

'Not quite,' Jack said. 'There's something tucked into the corner here. Well, what do you know? Look at this.' He held up a silver bracelet and began to polish it with his handkerchief. 'Here, have a look.' He handed the bracelet to Rebecca.

'How romantic. If only it could talk,' she said, holding it up to the light.

'Perhaps it can. Look over here. There's an inscription on the inside.'

'What does it say?'

'One word –*Örökke*. How strange. I wonder what it means.'

'Could it be a name, you think?'

'No idea. It really doesn't matter, I suppose,' continued Jack. 'I want you to have it. Here, let me put it on.'

'I couldn't possibly, Jack. It's yours ...'

'Don't be silly.' Jack reached for her wrist. 'I insist. There, it's done. Look. A perfect fit.'

'That's very sweet of you, thank you.' She gave him a peck on the cheek.

'And thanks for the party,' said Jack. 'Come on, let me show you around.'

'You have some exquisite pieces. What's this?' asked Rebecca, running her hand over the gleaming surface of a cedar chest with brass corner plates and brass handles.

‘You have a good eye. This is one of my best pieces. A campaign chest.’

‘What, for going to war?’

‘Not quite. Governor Fitzroy commissioned a Sydney cabinetmaker, Andrew Leneham, in about 1860 – the same year, incidentally, this cottage was built – to make specimen boxes for the presentation of gold samples to Queen Victoria. This is one of them. Gold was discovered in New South Wales in 1851.’

‘How fascinating. And this?’

‘This is a writing slope. A kind of portable desk, also made of cedar. It’s mitre joined at the corners here, with recessed brass carrying handles. It has internal compartments for writing utensils and documents. It also has a secret compartment – here. To hide love letters and gold coins.’

‘Drum roll, please. And now comes the surprise; its value? What’s it worth?’ teased Rebecca.

‘You’re making fun of me. Am I boring you?’

‘Not at all,’ said Rebecca, putting her hand reassuringly on Jack’s arm. ‘You have quite a collection.’ Rebecca pointed to the painting above the chest. ‘This is fabulous. What is it?’

‘Brett Whiteley. Do you like it?’

‘Fascinating. Antiques and modern paintings. Polished wooden floorboards and sandstone walls. Not at all what I expected.’

‘What did you expect?’ asked Jack, handing Rebecca a glass of wine. ‘Homes tell us so much ...’

‘I can’t really say. But not this ...’ she replied.

‘You know, this is the first time we’ve had a conversation like this since you took me under your wing,’ said Jack quietly. It had been just over three months since his New York publisher had introduced him to Rebecca Armstrong. It was an unlikely fit. The tall, lanky, suntanned Australian larrikin first-time-author with the funny accent, and the elegant, sophisticated New York PR agent representing several well established writers on the bestseller list. Faded jeans and leather jackets met Hermes and Cartier; the experienced New Yorker taking on the rookie from Down Under. Yet, somehow it worked. It worked, because Jack had written an exceptional book and genuinely needed

help in dealing with his success and sudden fame. Rebecca found his inexperience endearing, and his willingness to listen to her advice strangely flattering. And there was one more thing: it was exciting to be around him.

‘You know a lot about me. But I know very little about you,’ Jack said. ‘That’s not quite fair, don’t you think?’

Rebecca laughed. ‘What do you want to know?’

‘Surely you didn’t just pop up out of nowhere one day as a successful businesswoman in New York? You must have somehow clawed your way through that treacherous jungle first.’

For a while she looked at him pensively.

‘Where did you come from, I wonder?’ Jack asked, reaching for her hand.

Rebecca wore large glasses, giving her an endearingly studious look which didn’t quite go with the designer labels and expensive French accessories. Jack suspected this was deliberate. Somehow, the glasses always stood out. She had several pairs to suit different occasions, just like handbags and shoes. That afternoon, she wore an old-fashioned tortoiseshell pair that kept sliding down her nose. She kept pushing them back up with her index finger while pursing her lips.

‘That’s quite a question. Have you heard of Lancaster County?’ Rebecca asked.

‘Pennsylvania. Amish territory ...’

‘Well informed, as usual.’ She nodded appreciatively. ‘My maiden name was Stolfus. I grew up on a small farm outside Philadelphia with my three brothers. We had no electricity, no television, radio or kitchen appliances. Musical instruments were forbidden and cars not allowed.’

‘Buggy?’ interrupted Jack.

‘Right again. We spoke Pennsylvania Dutch and our only transport was a horse-drawn buggy which took us to the markets in Philly once a week with our produce – eggs and fresh vegetables. I tended a small stall with my mother in my long black dress, apron and starched white bonnet.’

‘Very cute. I can just see you ...’ Jack teased.

‘My brothers were all carpenters making furniture in the barn behind our house when they didn’t work in the fields,’ Rebecca continued, undeterred. ‘Mother and I made quilts

in the evenings by candlelight. My father had a long beard but no moustache – that too was forbidden – and always wore a straw hat and baggy black trousers held up by braces.’

‘And I’m supposed to be the dark horse here ...’ interjected Jack, refilling Rebecca’s glass.

‘Fun was a barn-raising with lots of laughter, prayer and games, and enough food to feed the entire county for a year. It was a community event. You know, everyone pulling together to help a neighbour. That’s where I met Amos ...’ Rebecca paused and turned away, her eyes misting over. It only lasted for an instant, opening a tiny crack in her otherwise carefully controlled demeanour.

‘Amos?’ asked Jack.

‘My first husband. We fell in love and ran away, leaving everything behind ...’

‘*First* husband?’

‘I haven’t been lucky with men ...’

Jack sensed it was time to change the subject. ‘I ran away too,’ he said. ‘As you know, I left a Queensland cattle station for the big smoke. I started out sweeping floors and running errands for a Brisbane newspaper.’

Appreciating his tact, Rebecca looked at Jack and smiled. *There’s a lot more to this guy*, she thought, *than he lets you see*. ‘And I started out as a receptionist, working for a fashion magazine in New York ...’ she said.

‘*The Devil Wears Prada* stuff?’

Rebecca chuckled. ‘A bit like that, but without the free clothes. You saw the movie?’

‘Loved it.’

‘What was it like? Growing up on a cattle station?’

Jack took his time before replying and looked pensively at Rebecca. ‘Lonely and harsh,’ he said. ‘I learnt to ride before I could walk and helped around the house as soon as I could stand. Our closest neighbour was 50 miles away, and it took three hours on a good day to reach town in the old ute. I used to ride in the back with Bonny and Clyde.’

‘I thought you had no siblings,’ interrupted Rebecca.

Jack began to chuckle. ‘Bonny and Clyde were our cattle dogs. Sharp as tacks. They were my friends. Our enemy was the drought. It was never far away,’ said Jack, turning

serious, 'and when it came, it lasted for years. That's when the land became a dustbowl, the cattle began to die, and the bank manager came knocking.' Jack looked away. 'Mum hated it with a passion. She was a country girl from Wales. She married my father when she was just eighteen ...'

Realising that she had opened old wounds, Rebecca reached across and put her hand on Jack's. 'What happened to your parents?' she asked.

'Mum left. One day, she couldn't take it anymore and ran off with the publican in town. We never saw her again. And then I ran away too,' Jack said, the sadness in his voice reflecting the heartache of painful memories. 'Dad eked out a living on the cattle station with three Aboriginal stockmen until he got sick ...'

'What happened to him?'

'He lost the farm and died a broken man in a boarding house in Townsville a few years ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Such is life,' said Jack, reaching for his wine glass. 'We all have to follow our own path. Often barefoot, and some of it is treacherous and paved with nails.'

Rebecca squeezed Jack's hand. 'Your divorce?' she asked, changing direction.

'Messy, like all of them.'

'Girlfriends?'

Jack shrugged. 'Girlfriends? Are you kidding? With my diabolical schedule? I couldn't keep a canary in a cage ...'

'Interesting comparison ...'

'You know what they say: a rolling stone gathers no moss.'

'Poor boy ... But it wasn't always that way. What about that policewoman in your book?'

'Jana?'

Rebecca nodded, watching Jack carefully.

'She was an old flame. You can't ignite old flames; it doesn't work. The spark isn't there anymore,' Jack said pensively. 'In the end, she fell for the other guy.'

'Marcus Carrington, the lawyer ...'

The look on Jack's face told Rebecca it was time to back off. 'We're still friends,' said

Jack. Rebecca wasn't convinced. 'Now, let me show you something interesting ...' Jack pointed to a curious piece consisting of three wooden steps leading nowhere.

'What on earth is that?' asked Rebecca.

'Bed steps. That's how you climbed into the feathers in the good old days. The top step here opens up – see – for your jewellery and personal stuff. But the really important part was this.' Jack opened the second step and pulled out a lidded commode seat.

'Is this what I think it is?' asked Rebecca, a sparkle in her eye.

'Sure is! The chamber pot is over there,' said Jack, pointing to the window sill. But enough of the tour. How about some dinner?'

'I was beginning to think you'd never ask.' They linked arms and strolled down the corridor towards the kitchen.

'Unlucky with men, eh?'

Rebecca nodded.

'A woman like you? You're obviously looking in the wrong places,' said Jack.

'Looking under stones would be a wrong place then?'

'Definitely.'

'Thanks, Jack. I'll keep that in mind.'

'I promised to cook for you, remember? Well, this is your lucky day.'

'I'm sure it is. You're the first man who ever offered to cook something just for me. I can't wait.'

'You may be sorry.'

'I doubt it.'

'Amish, eh? You'd be used to plain tucker then ...' teased Jack, opening the door to the kitchen.

'We may be known as the Plain People, but the food, I tell you, was never plain.'

'Neither is my cooking; follow me.'

4

At the old farm near Bathurst, 10 January

‘Do you know what time it is?’ asked Will. He turned to look at the clock on the bedside table and almost dropped the phone.

‘It’s important, mate! There’s something I have to show you!’ said Jack urgently.

‘Can’t it wait till the morning?’

‘No, it can’t. Please, Will ...’

Will lived in the flat above his antique shop a few hundred metres up the road from Jack’s place. It was faster to walk than to try to find a parking spot in the crowded Balmain street. He arrived ten minutes later, wearing a pair of baggy shorts and a crumpled tee shirt he had obviously slept in. Jack was waiting on the front doorstep of his cottage, a glass of wine in his hand.

‘I thought you were having dinner with your posh agent last night. What happened? Did you have a blue?’ said Will.

‘No. She caught the last ferry back to town hours ago. Come in. I’ve been working on this since she left.’ Jack led the way to the courtyard at the back and pointed to the secretaire by the fountain.

‘You dragged me out of the sack at two in the morning to show me this? Is that it? You must be blotto.’

‘Not quite. Here, have a look.’ Jack wiped the desktop with his polishing cloth, switched on his torch and aimed the beam at the top right-hand corner. The desktop was badly marked with deep scratches, indentations, faded inkblots and candle wax stains. All normal wear and tear from more than a century of extensive use. *Colonial patina*, as it was affectionately called in the trade.

‘What am I looking for?’ asked Will, rubbing his eyes.

‘There’s something written here – look.’ Jack pointed to some letters scratched into the wood.

‘What does it say?’

‘First, there’s a name. Here – “Anna Popov”. Can you see it?’

‘Sure.’

‘And then one more word. A little to the right –“Help”.’

‘Yes.’

‘And then comes the really interesting bit over here in the corner. A date. Well, just the year actually –“07”.’

‘So? Is this some kind of joke?’

‘Far from it. Does the name ring a bell?’

‘Should it?’

‘Come on, Will. Think back! January 2005. Alice Springs, two girls disappeared ...’

‘Popov ... Popov. Oh yeah ...It was in the news for months. They vanished without a trace. Backpackers.’

‘That’s it. I looked it up on the internet before you came. The police operation was huge at the time with lots of overseas interest and media attention, especially from Britain. Almost as big as Azaria Chamberlain. The police even brought in Aboriginal trackers and a psychic. “Operation Dingo II”, it was called. It came to nothing. The case was closed a year later. No leads, no clues. Zilch.’

‘What are you getting at, Jack?’ asked Will impatiently.

‘Aren’t you even just a little bit curious? We find this old secretaire here – purely by accident – on an abandoned farm in the middle of nowhere with “Anna Popov – Help” scratched into the desktop. Next to a date – 07. That’s two years after she disappeared!’ Jack said, jabbing his finger at the numbers.

‘You’re not seriously suggesting it was this Popov girl who wrote this desktop graffiti two years after she vanished? Are you saying she could be alive, or was at least, in 2007? Come on, mate, I can think of a hundred other explanations. I’m going back to bed.’

‘I have a funny feeling about this, Will,’ said Jack pensively. ‘What if this is for real? What if this is a desperate plea for help and we ignore it?’

‘You’re a hopeless romantic, Jack, admit it. This is bullshit! Sheer speculation and you know it.’

‘The place was spooky, you said so yourself,’ argued Jack. ‘I think we should at least go back and have another look. Make some enquiries, poke around a little. You know, find out who lived there before, what happened to the place, why it was abandoned, the fire ... The agent acted strange, admit it. He accepted the pittance we offered for the stuff

without argument. He was happy – no, relieved – to be rid of it.’ Will shook his head. ‘Come on, Will, it’s only a three-hour drive. We could do the whole thing in a day, easy. There and back.’

‘I thought you had to go to London. Pressing author business.’

‘I’m leaving on Monday. We could do it today.’

‘You’re wasting your time.’

‘I’ll pick you up at six.’

‘We’re getting too old for this, Jack!’

‘Bullshit!’

‘Dreamer,’ said Will.

‘Scared?’

‘Me? What of?’

‘I may be on to something ...’ said Jack.

They arrived at the farm just after nine in the morning. It was already very hot and the flies were unbearable. They had to walk the last 200 metres to the gate because the track was too rutted for Jack’s MG. On their first visit, they had completely ignored the house. This time, however, they decided to take a closer look at it.

The fire had obviously started in the kitchen. It was almost completely gutted.

‘Here, look at this,’ said Jack, picking up an urn with a rubber hose attached to one end. ‘And all this junk over here.’ He pointed to a rusty stove-like six burner lying on top of a heap of glass tubes, steel clamps and broken bottles.

‘Looks more like stuff from a laboratory than a farmhouse kitchen,’ commented Will, kicking some metal tubing aside.

The front room was empty. Fingers of sunlight reaching through gaping holes in the roof illuminated intricate cobwebs ready to ensnare the careless and the curious. There were no doors left. All the windows were broken and most of the floorboards had rotted away. Lying on its back, a fly-encrusted rat was decomposing in front of the fireplace.

‘Here, have a look at this,’ said Jack. He pointed to a timber wall next to the fireplace. The wall was covered in black numbers carved into the wood in neat groups of three sixes: ‘666’

‘How weird ... Look over there; above the fireplace. What do you reckon it is? A stuffed goat’s head?’

The mantelpiece with its forest of black candles reminded Jack of a strange pagan altar waiting for a sacrifice. Pools of hard candle wax coated the floorboards below the mantelpiece.

‘This place gives me the creeps,’ said Will.

Jack picked up an iron poker and went through the mound of ash in the fireplace. Buried under the ash, charred bones, an iron cross covered in soot and a dagger with a broken blade had escaped destruction by the flames. *Leftovers from a black mass?* thought Jack, glancing at the back of the fireplace. Then something behind the grate caught his eye. It looked like a piece of limp material – burnt around the edges – with some kind of picture in the middle. He lifted it up with the poker and dropped it on the floor in front of him.

‘How weird,’ he said, examining the strange thing lying on the floorboards. It turned out to be a piece of leather with a picture of a human head cut in half. The left side of the face was a grinning skull, the right, the face of a bearded man. On top of the head sat a conical black hat with strange looking symbols like silver arrows and stars.

‘What do you reckon? A magician?’ ventured Will, pointing to the head.

‘Half dead, half alive?’

‘Yeah. Something like that.’

‘Black magic.’

‘Scary place. Let’s get out of here.’

‘Why don’t you track down the agent?’ suggested Will on their way back to the village. ‘See what you can find out about the farm. I’ll try the store and the pub. Let’s meet there in an hour.’

Everyone they spoke to had two things in common: suspicion and a reluctance to talk about the farm. The responses varied. Moving from polite evasion via pretended ignorance and obvious lies to rude rebuff, they covered everything but the truth.

‘I could do with a cold beer,’ said Jack, pulling up a stool next to Will’s at the bar. Apart from the publican reading the paper behind the counter, the bar was deserted.

‘Any luck?’ asked Will.

‘Nothing! The bastard didn’t want to know me and almost threw me out.’

‘Same here,’ said Will, lowering his voice, ‘except for the vicar. You just missed him. He was having a quiet beer at ten in the morning.’

Jack ordered two beers. ‘What did you find out?’ he asked.

‘About a year ago, there were some rather unusual characters at the farm who caused the village here, and particularly the vicar, a lot of grief. They terrorised the locals for months and only left after the farm burnt down.’

‘Not your ideal tenants,’ said Jack. He took a sip of his beer and nodded appreciatively. ‘Who were they?’

‘At first, even the vicar was reluctant to talk. But three scotches later he opened up a little.’

‘Well?’

‘A bikie gang,’ said Will, lowering his voice even further. ‘Can you believe it? Here, in this God forsaken place?’

Jack looked up, surprised. ‘Yes, I can,’ he said, grinning. ‘And we have the proof right here.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘This.’ Jack pulled the piece of leather he’d found in the fireplace out of his pocket and put it on the bar in front of him. ‘Do you know what this is?’

‘No idea.’

‘The penny dropped as soon as you mentioned the bikies. This, my friend, is the colours of an outlaw motorcycle club.’

‘You’re kidding! Do you know which club?’

‘Yes. The Wizards of Oz.’

Will’s jaw almost dropped into his glass. ‘Let me buy you another beer, mate. You deserve it,’ he said.

5

On the plane to London, 11 January

‘You asked me the other day how I find the material for my articles, remember?’ said Jack, leaning back in his comfortable business class seat just before takeoff. He reached for his glass of champagne and turned towards Rebecca sitting next to him. ‘I don’t find the stories, they find me. Cheers.’ They touched glasses.

‘You went back to that farm with Will yesterday? Why?’

‘Because I believe another story has found me.’

‘Oh? And are you going to tell me about it?’ asked Rebecca, looking at him mischievously, ‘or is it a secret?’

‘You really want to know?’

‘Of course. Don’t tease me.’

‘It’s about a girl. A backpacker, who disappeared without a trace with her girlfriend four years ago in Alice Springs.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘Listen to this.’ Reaching for his briefcase, Jack told her about his discovery at the farm. He showed Rebecca photos of the piece of leather found in the fireplace at the abandoned homestead. He described the derelict farmhouse, what was left of the kitchen, and the room with the strange wall covered with numbers.

‘It all comes back to the inscription,’ said Jack. ‘How do we explain it? Is it some practical joke? Hardly. Coincidence? I don’t think so. Popov is an unusual name in Australia. I’m convinced that the secretaire has been at the farm for a long time. So, whoever carved “Anna Popov Help 07” into the desktop, must have been there in 2007. It’s the most logical explanation, don’t you agree?’

‘Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?’ asked Rebecca.

‘I thought you were on my side! Aren’t you supposed to give me encouragement?’ replied Jack, pretending to be hurt.

‘Minders like me have to make sure that their charges keep at least one foot on the ground, and one eye on reality.’

‘Inspiration moves in mysterious ways and fact can be stranger than fiction. I’ve seen

it many times, and so have you. Take our current book, for instance. We're travelling the world promoting it, millions are reading it, the media can't get enough of it and politicians have taken notice of it and changed laws. It's a great success, yes?'

Rebecca nodded.

'Yet, as we both know, that story began with an old photograph found by accident in the ruins of a cottage destroyed by bushfire. Look where it ended up.'

'Point taken,' said Rebecca, reaching for Jack's hand.

'And guess who found that photograph and alerted me to that story?'

'Your friend Will. I know.'

'If I have any talent at all, it's certainly not my writing. Many can do that much better than I. I'm a reporter, not a writer. It's my instinct for a good story, that's the difference,' said Jack. 'I'm a newshound with a good nose. I love to investigate, get to the bottom of things, solve the puzzle, explain the mystery and if I'm really lucky, find, no, expose the truth. I can feel it in my bones that this is one of those stories. I can't wait to get back to Sydney ...'

'To do what?'

'Talk to this man,' Jack answered quietly, handing Rebecca another photograph.

'My God! Who on earth is *that*?'

The photograph looked like a typical mugshot of a delinquent under arrest. There was even a number at the bottom. Long, shiny black hair neatly parted in the middle, fell down on broad, tattooed shoulders. The eyes – a little too far apart – were slanted, reptilian, and almost almond shaped. Prominent cheekbones, a heavy jaw and a drooping moustache gave the subject a distinctly Mongolian look. A thin scar running diagonally across the forehead, brow and cheek, pointed to a large earring in the left ear.

'Eugene Alfonso Cagliostro. Aka the Wizard. Founder and president of the Wizards of Oz motorcycle club. You've already seen the club's emblem.'

'The piece of leather from the fireplace?'

'Exactly. That was the important clue. Eugene's a notorious character and very dangerous. My sources told me that he's the only son of an Italian trapeze artist and a Gypsy fortune teller – circus performers – and has spent more than half his life behind bars,' Jack said. 'Armed robbery, extortion, numerous assaults, drug trafficking and

bestiality, would you believe, are some of the more colourful entries in his charge sheets over the years. The club is quite small, but run with almost military precision, demanding monastic obedience from its members.'

'He looks evil.'

'A bit different from the Amish lads you grew up with, I suppose?'

'How did you find all this out in such a short time?'

'Friends in the police force – well-placed friends, that is – and prison wardens, can be an excellent source ... of valuable information,' said Jack, enjoying himself.

'I knew it from the start: travelling with you, Jack, could never be boring. Here's the list of your UK engagements.' Rebecca thrust a sheet of paper into Jack's hand. It was time for a reality check. 'How about another glass of champagne?'

Jack signalled to the stewardess. 'I was afraid of this. Look, book signings, talk-back radio, morning TV shows, dinner engagements with book clubs, receptions, speeches and a press conference. It's never ending. I won't have time to come up for air!!'

'You're famous, Jack. That's the price you have to pay. You entered almost unnoticed through the back door and went straight to centre stage. And all that without the usual hurdles: the knock-backs, the countless rejections, the waiting ... Many would give their proverbial right arm to be in your position,' came the gentle rebuke.

'I know ... It's just ...'

'What?'

'Not me.'

'Get used to it, buster. Think of your bank balance. It must be rising at an alarming rate,' Rebecca said.

'If you can arrange a day off for me – just to give my fingers a rest during the London book signing, you understand – I really would like to meet this man before I talk to Eugene,' said Jack, handing Rebecca another photograph. 'The one on the right, here.'

Three sophisticated looking, middle-aged gentlemen in dinner suits were smiling at the camera.

'Who is this?'

'Professor Nikolai Popov, Anna's father. The photo was taken last year in Stockholm. He received the Nobel Prize for physics.'

‘You want a *whole* day off?’ asked Rebecca, shaking her head disapprovingly.

‘Purely for research purposes, you understand. Please?’

‘All right. I’ll see what I can do,’ Rebecca sighed, shrugging her shoulders in resignation. ‘Authors!’

‘Eugene is obviously not the only one expecting monastic obedience,’ mumbled Jack.

‘Did you say something?’

‘No, nothing,’ he murmured, and closed his eyes.

Jack adjusted his seat, stretched out his long legs and nodded off. He found himself back home in his study. The old secretaire was whispering to him: ‘Help me ... help me’. Jack woke with a start. He opened his eyes and stared drowsily at Rebecca’s hand on the armrest next to him. The silver bracelet he had found in the secret drawer looked lovely on her slender wrist. *I wonder*, he thought, rubbing his eyes. *A link perhaps?*

6

Vienna, 13 January

Jack hurried out of the BBC studio after his early morning TV interview. It was his only engagement that day and the hire car Rebecca had arranged to take him to the airport was already waiting outside.

Contacting Professor Popov personally had been impossible. The Nobel laureate's schedule was almost as hectic as Jack's, with speaking engagements and receptions all over Europe. All Rebecca had been able to find out was that Professor Popov would be in Vienna that day, addressing a group of prominent physicists at the university. Jack was hoping to somehow catch up with him there.

Sitting in the back of the limousine, Jack opened his briefcase and began to sort through the meagre material. He had to admit, when he looked at everything objectively, it didn't amount to very much. Most of it was a hunch, and to sell a hunch was never easy. However, he had decided to borrow the bracelet from Rebecca. What if it was in some way connected to Anna? It was the only item found in the secretaire and it was in surprisingly good condition, suggesting a fairly recent origin. He would show it to Professor Popov, just in case. But first, he had to find a way to meet him.

Trying to talk to people who don't want to know you is part of every journalist's lot. The challenge was simply to find that one window of opportunity that would invariably present itself, and climb through before it closed. That needed ingenuity and luck; especially luck. Unfortunately, that day all the windows appeared to be firmly shut with typical Austrian efficiency. Security at the university was tight and Jack couldn't get near the conference building. With Islamic terrorist paranoia sweeping across Europe and Vienna's reputation as a safe conference venue at stake, the authorities weren't taking any chances. Policemen armed with machine guns patrolled the grounds with sniffer dogs and all approaches to the building had been sealed off.

Jack didn't speak German but he had to get a message to the Professor while he was still in the building. It was his only chance – Jack had to return to London that evening. Then he remembered something he had pulled off at the United Nations building in New York in similar circumstances – with spectacular success. An old CNN fox had shown

him a tried and tested journo trick: how to get a message to a delegate he had never met, without going through security.

Jack walked over to one of the benches, cleared away the snow and sat down. *Here goes*, he thought, opening his briefcase. He took an enlarged photo of the desktop showing the inscription – ‘Anna PopovHelp 07’ – out of the case and scribbled the words: ‘Please call to discuss. Urgent!’ on the back. Underneath, he jotted down his name and mobile number, slipped the photo into an envelope, but didn’t seal it. Then he hurried across to the young policeman standing at the barricade.

Fortunately, the man spoke a little English. Jack showed him his Australian press ID and explained that Professor Popov had dropped an envelope as he was getting into his car at the hotel. Jack knew that by passing the envelope to the young officer, he had made it his responsibility to do something about it. The important thing was to leave it there and walk away.

Jack looked at his watch. ‘I have to run,’ he said, turning on his heels. ‘Please make sure he gets it. He’s a Nobel Prize winner ...’

Well, it’s on its way, he thought. *Fingers crossed I’ll get a call*. All going well, the envelope would move up the ladder of command and find the Professor.

At first, the policeman had been reluctant to do anything. However, with the words ‘he’s a Nobel Prize winner’ ringing loudly in his ears, he changed his mind and took the envelope to the officer in charge.

Professor Popov called Jack two hours later.

‘If this is some kind of sick joke aimed at getting an interview, forget it!’ he said curtly. ‘Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just hand the photograph to the police and be done with it.’

It took all of Jack’s eloquence and powers of persuasion to convince the Professor to give him five minutes of his time. The Professor agreed to meet Jack at five, and gave him the name of his hotel.

Professor Popov stepped out of the lift and looked around. Although Jack recognised him instantly from the Nobel Prize photograph, the Professor was much smaller than he had

expected. The closely cropped hair, the round, steel-rimmed glasses and pointed goatee made him look like a Russian revolutionary of the 1920s. The only thing missing was the starched collar and cravat. Jack walked over and introduced himself.

They found an empty table and sat down. During the next few minutes, Jack described where and how he had acquired the secretaire. Hinting that Anna could perhaps still be alive, he began to hypothesise about the inscription. At first, Professor Popov listened politely. Soon, however, he started to fidget in his seat, took off his glasses and began to polish them meticulously with his handkerchief.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt you, Mr Rogan, but isn’t this pure speculation? The police investigation was extremely thorough and lasted for more than a year. In the end, the case was closed. There were no leads. No clues. Nothing. You cannot imagine what my wife and I have been through. I’m sure your intentions are good, but I cannot allow this to give us false hope only to be disappointed again. We have already endured a death of a thousand cuts. To have to face it all again would be too much to bear,’ said the Professor quietly. ‘Please, try to understand.’ He pushed the photograph across the table towards Jack and stood up.

‘Before you go, Professor, there’s one more thing ...’ said Jack, reaching into his pocket. ‘I also found this, hidden in the secretaire.’ Jack placed the silver bracelet on the table in front of him.

At first, the Professor just stared. Then he sat down again, looked at the bracelet more closely without touching it, and paled. Covering his face with his hands, he sat in silence.

‘Did this belong to your daughter?’ asked Jack quietly after a while. The Professor didn’t appear to have heard him and Jack had to repeat the question.

‘You’ll have to ask my wife that. My *former* wife,’ the Professor corrected himself, his voice sounding hoarse. Pulling a pen out of his pocket, he reached for the envelope on the table and wrote down a number. ‘Now, if you would excuse me, my driver is waiting.’

Professor Popov stood up and handed the envelope to Jack.

Confronted by something too painful to remember, but impossible to forget, the celebrated Nobel laureate looked like a broken old man.

‘Thank you, Professor,’ said Jack, holding out his hand. ‘I will do that.’

For an instant, the Professor hesitated, then reached out and shook Jack's hand.

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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